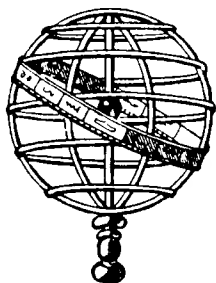




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THE LAW & THE LADY

A NOVEL

BY

WILKIE COLLINS

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.



London

CHATTO AND WINDUS, PICCADILLY

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THE LAW *and* THE LADY.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE INDICTMENT OF MRS. BEAULY.

I STARTED to my feet, and looked at Miserrimus Dexter. I was too much agitated to be able to speak to him.

My utmost expectations had not prepared me for the tone of absolute conviction in which he had spoken. At the best, I had anticipated that he might, by the barest chance, agree with me in suspecting Mrs. Beauly. And now, his own lips had said it, without hesitation or reserve! ‘There isn’t the shadow of a doubt; Mrs. Beauly poisoned her.’

‘Sit down,’ he said, quietly. ‘There’s nothing to be afraid of. Nobody can hear us in this room.’

I sat down again, and recovered myself a little.

‘Have you never told anyone else what you have told me?’ was the first question that I put to him.

‘Never. No one else suspected her.’

‘Not even the lawyers?’

‘Not even the lawyers. There is no legal evidence against Mrs. Beauly. There is nothing but moral certainty.’

‘Surely you might have found the evidence, if you had tried?’

He laughed at the idea.

‘Look at me!’ he said. ‘How is a man to hunt up evidence who is tied to this chair? Besides, there were other difficulties in my way. I am not generally in the habit of needlessly betraying myself—I am a cautious man, though you may not have noticed it. But my immeasurable hatred of Mrs. Beauly was not to be concealed. If eyes can tell secrets, she must have discovered, in my eyes, that I hungered and thirsted to see her in the hangman’s hands. From first to last, I tell you,

Mrs. Borgia-Beauly was on her guard against me. Can I describe her cunning? All my resources of language are not equal to the task. Take the degrees of comparison to give you a faint idea of it. I am positively cunning; the devil is comparatively cunning; Mrs. Beauly is superlatively cunning. No! no! If she is ever discovered, at this distance of time, it will not be done by a man—it will be done by a woman; a woman whom she doesn't suspect; a woman who can watch her with the patience of a tigress in a state of starvation——'

'Say a woman like Me!' I broke out. 'I am ready to try.'

His eyes glittered; his teeth showed themselves viciously under his moustache; he drummed fiercely with both hands on the arms of his chair.

'Do you really mean it?' he asked.

'Put me in your position,' I answered. 'Enlighten me with your moral certainty (as you call it)—and you shall see!'

'I'll do it!' he said. 'Tell me one

thing first. How did an outside stranger, like you, come to suspect her ? ’

I set before him, to the best of my ability, the various elements of suspicion which I had collected from the evidence at the Trial ; and I laid especial stress on the fact (sworn to by the nurse) that Mrs. Beaully was missing, exactly at the time when Christina Ormsay had left Mrs. Eustace Macallan alone in her room.

‘ You have hit it ! ’ cried Miserrimus Dexter. ‘ You are a wonderful woman ! What was she doing on the morning of the day when Mrs. Eustace Macallan died poisoned ? And where was she, during the dark hours of the night ? I can tell you where she was *not* :—she was not in her own room. ’

‘ Not in her own room ? ’ I repeated. ‘ Are you really sure of that ? ’

‘ I am sure of everything that I say, when I am speaking of Mrs. Beaully. Mind that ; and now listen ! This is a drama ; and I excel in dramatic narrative. You shall judge for yourself. Date, the

twentieth of October. Scene, The Corridor, called The Guests' Corridor, at Gleninch. On one side, a row of windows looking out into the garden. On the other, a row of four bedrooms, with dressing-rooms attached. First bedroom (beginning from the staircase), occupied by Mrs. Beauly. Second bedroom, empty. Third bedroom occupied by Miserrimus Dexter. Fourth bedroom empty. So much for the Scene! The time comes next—the time is eleven at night. Dexter discovered in his bedroom, reading. Enter to him Eustace Macallan. Eustace speaks :—" My dear fellow, be particularly careful not to make any noise ; don't bowl your chair up and down the corridor to-night." Dexter enquires, " Why ? " Eustace answers, " Mrs. Beauly has been dining with some friends in Edinburgh, and has come back terribly fatigued ; she has gone up to her room to rest." Dexter makes another enquiry (satirical enquiry, this time) :—" How does she look when she is terribly fatigued ? As beautiful as ever ? " Answer :

—“ I don’t know ; I have not seen her ; she slipped upstairs, without speaking to anybody.” Third enquiry by Dexter (logical enquiry, on this occasion) :—“ If she spoke to nobody, how do you know she is fatigued ? ” Eustace hands me a morsel of paper, and answers, “ Don’t be a fool ! I found this on the hall table. Remember what I have told you about keeping quiet : good night ! ” Eustace retires. Dexter looks at the paper, and reads these lines in pencil :—“ Just returned. Please forgive me for going to bed without saying good-night. I have over-exerted myself ; I am dreadfully fatigued. (Signed) HELENA.” Dexter is by nature suspicious ; Dexter suspects Mrs. Beaulieu. Never mind his reasons ; there is no time to enter into his reasons now. He puts the case to himself thus :—“ A weary woman would never have given herself the trouble to write this. She would have found it much less fatiguing to knock at the drawing-room door as she passed, and to make her apologies by word of mouth. I see some-

thing here out of the ordinary way : I shall make a night of it in my chair." Very good. Dexter proceeds to make a night of it. He opens his door ; wheels himself softly into the corridor ; locks the doors of the two empty bedrooms, and returns (with the keys in his pocket) to his own room. " Now," says D. to himself, " if I hear a door softly opened in this part of the house, I shall know for certain it is Mrs. Beauly's door !" Upon that, he closes his own door, leaving the tiniest little chink to look through ; puts out his light ; and waits and watches at his tiny little chink, like a cat at a mousehole. The corridor is the only place he wants to see ; and a lamp burns there all night. Twelve o'clock strikes ; he hears the doors below bolted and locked, and nothing happens. Half-past twelve—and nothing still. The house is as silent as the grave. One o'clock ; two o'clock — same silence. Half-past two—and something happens at last. Dexter hears a sound close by, in the corridor. It is the sound of a handle

turning very softly in a door—in the only door that can be opened, the door of Mrs. Beauly's room. Dexter drops noiselessly from his chair, on to his hands; lies flat on the floor at his chink; and listens. He hears the handle closed again; he sees a dark object flit by him; he pops his head out of his door, down on the floor where nobody would think of looking for him. And, what does he see? Mrs. Beauly! There she goes, with the long brown cloak over her shoulders which she wears when she is driving, floating behind her. In a moment more, she disappears, past the fourth bedroom, and turns at a right angle, into a second corridor, called the South Corridor. What rooms are in the South Corridor? There are three rooms. First room, the little study, mentioned in the nurse's evidence. Second room, Mrs. Eustace Macallan's bedchamber. Third room, her husband's bedchamber. What does Mrs. Beauly (supposed to be worn out by fatigue) want in that part of the house, at half-past two in the morning?

Dexter decides on running his risk of being seen—and sets forth on a voyage of discovery. Do you know how he gets from place to place, without his chair? Have you seen the poor deformed creature hop on his hands? Shall he show you how he does it, before he goes on with his story?’

I hastened to stop the proposed exhibition.

‘I saw you hop last night,’ I said. ‘Go on! pray go on with your story!’

‘Do you like my dramatic style of narrative?’ he asked. ‘Am I interesting?’

‘Indescribably interesting, Mr. Dexter. I am eager to hear more.’

He smiled in high approval of his own abilities.

‘I am equally good at the autobiographical style,’ he said. ‘Shall we try that next, by way of variety?’

‘Anything you like,’ I cried, losing all patience with him, ‘if you will only go on!’

‘Part Two: Autobiographical Style,’ he announced, with a wave of his hand. ‘I hopped along the Guests’ Corridor, and

turned into the South Corridor. I stopped at the little study. Door open; nobody there. I crossed the study to the second door, communicating with Mrs. Macallan's bedchamber. Locked! I looked through the keyhole. Was there something hanging over it, on the other side? I can't say—I only know there was nothing to be seen, but blank darkness. I listened. Nothing to be heard. Same blank darkness, same absolute silence, inside the locked second door of Mrs. Eustace's room, opening on the corridor. I went on to her husband's bedchamber. I had the worst possible opinion of Mrs. Beauly—I should not have been in the least surprised if I had caught her in Eustace's room. I looked through the keyhole. In this case, the key was out of it—or was turned the right way for me—I don't know which. Eustace's bed was opposite the door. No discovery. I could see him, by his nightlight, innocently asleep. I reflected a little. The back staircase was at the end of the corridor, beyond me. I slid down the stairs, and looked about me

on the lower floor, by the light of the night-lamp. Doors all fast locked, and keys outside, so that I could try them myself. House door barred and bolted. Door leading into the servants' offices barred and bolted. I got back to my own room, and thought it out quietly. Where could she be? Certainly *in* the house, somewhere. Where? I had made sure of the other rooms; the field of search was exhausted. She could only be in Mrs. Macallan's room—the *one* room which had baffled my investigations; the *only* room which had not lent itself to examination. Add to this, that the key of the door in the study, communicating with Mrs. Macallan's room, was stated in the nurse's evidence to be missing; and don't forget that the dearest object of Mrs. Beauly's life (on the showing of her own letter, read at the Trial) was to be Eustace Macallan's happy wife. Put these things together in your own mind, and you will know what my thoughts were, as I sat waiting for events in my chair, without my telling you. Towards four o'clock, strong

as I am, fatigue got the better of me. I fell asleep. Not for long. I woke with a start and looked at my watch. Twenty-five minutes past four. Had she got back to her room while I was asleep? I hopped to her door, and listened. Not a sound. I softly opened the door. The room was empty. I went back again to my own room to wait and watch. It was hard work to keep my eyes open. I drew up the window to let the cool air refresh me; I fought hard with exhausted nature; and exhausted nature won. I fell asleep again. This time it was eight in the morning when I woke. I have goodish ears, as you may have noticed. I heard women's voices talking under my open window. I peeped out. Mrs. Beaulieu and her maid, in close confabulation! Mrs. Beaulieu and her maid, looking guiltily about them to make sure that they were neither seen nor heard! "Take care, ma'am," I heard the maid say; "that horrid deformed monster is as sly as a fox. Mind he doesn't discover you." Mrs. Beaulieu answered, "You go first, and

look out in front ; I will follow you ; and make sure there is nobody behind us." With that, they disappeared round the corner of the house. In five minutes more I heard the door of Mrs. Beauly's room softly opened and closed again. Three hours later, the nurse met her in the corridor, innocently on her way to make enquiries at Mrs. Eustace Macallan's door. What do you think of these circumstances ? What do you think of Mrs. Beauly and her maid having something to say to each other, which they didn't dare say in the house—for fear of my being behind some door listening to them ? What do you think of these discoveries of mine being made, on the very morning when Mrs. Eustace was taken ill—on the very day when she died by a poisoner's hand ? Do you see your way to the guilty person ? And has mad Miserrimus Dexter been of some assistance to you, so far ?'

I was too violently excited to answer him. The way to the vindication of my husband's innocence was opened to me at last !

‘Where is she?’ I cried. ‘And where is that servant who is in her confidence?’

‘I can’t tell you,’ he said. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Where can I enquire? Can you tell me that?’

He considered a little.

‘There is one man who must know where she is—or who could find it out for you,’ he said.

‘Who is he? What is his name?’

‘He is a friend of Eustace’s. Major Fitz-David.’

‘I know him! I am going to dine with him next week. He has asked you to dine too.’

Miserrimus Dexter laughed contemptuously.

‘Major Fitz-David may do very well for the ladies,’ he said. ‘The ladies can treat him as a species of elderly human lap-dog. I don’t dine with lap-dogs; I have said, No. You go. He, or some of his ladies, may be of use to you. Who are the guests? Did he tell you?’

‘There was a French lady whose name I forget,’ I said, ‘and Lady Clarinda——’

‘That will do ! She is a friend of Mrs. Beauly’s. She is sure to know where Mrs. Beauly is. Come to me, the moment you have got your information. Find out if the maid is with her : she is the easiest to deal with of the two. Only make the maid open her lips ; and we have got Mrs. Beauly. We crush her,’ he cried, bringing his hand down like lightning on the last languid fly of the season, crawling over the arm of his chair, ‘we crush her as I crush this fly. Stop ! A question ; a most important question in dealing with the maid. Have you got any money ?’

‘Plenty of money.’

He snapped his fingers joyously.

‘The maid is ours !’ he cried. ‘It’s a matter of pounds, shillings, and pence, with the maid. Wait ! Another question. About your name ? If you approach Mrs. Beauly in your own character as Eustace’s wife, you approach her as the woman who has taken her place—you make a mortal

enemy of her at starting. Beware of that !’

My jealousy of Mrs. Beaully, smouldering in me all through the interview, burst into flame at those words. I could resist it no longer—I was obliged to ask him if my husband had ever loved her.

‘Tell me the truth,’ I said. ‘Did Eustace really——?’

He burst out laughing maliciously ; he penetrated my jealousy, and guessed my question almost before it had passed my lips.

‘Yes,’ he said ‘Eustace did really love her—and no mistake about it. She had every reason to believe (before the Trial) that the wife’s death would put her in the wife’s place. But the Trial made another man of Eustace. Mrs. Beaully had been a witness of the public degradation of him. That was enough to prevent his marrying Mrs. Beaully. He broke off with her at once and for ever—for the same reason precisely which has led him to separate himself from you. Existence with a woman who knew that he had been tried

for his life as a murderer, was an existence that he was not hero enough to face. You wanted the truth. There it is! You have need to be cautious of Mrs. Beauly—you have no need to be jealous of her. Take the safe course. Arrange with the Major, when you meet Lady Clarinda at his dinner, that you meet her under an assumed name.'

'I can go to the dinner,' I said, 'under the name in which Eustace married me. I can go as "Mrs. Woodville."'

'The very thing!' he exclaimed. 'What would I not give to be present when Lady Clarinda introduces you to Mrs. Beauly! Think of the situation. A woman with a hideous secret, hidden in her inmost soul: and another woman who knows of it—another woman who is bent, by fair means or foul, on dragging that secret into the light of day. What a struggle! What a plot for a novel! I am in a fever when I think of it. I am beside myself when I look into the future, and see Mrs. Borgia-Beauly brought to her knees at last. Don't be alarmed!' he cried, with the wild

light flashing once more in his eyes. 'My brains are beginning to boil again in my head. I must take refuge in physical exercise. I must blow off the steam, or I shall explode in my pink jacket on the spot!'

The old madness seized on him again. I made for the door, to secure my retreat in case of necessity—and then ventured to look round at him.

He was off on his furious wheels—half man, half chair—flying like a whirlwind to the other end of the room. Even this exercise was not violent enough for him, in his present mood. In an instant he was down on the floor; poised on his hands, and looking in the distance like a monstrous frog. Hopping down the room, he overthrew, one after another, all the smaller and lighter chairs as he passed them. Arrived at the end, he turned, surveyed the prostrate chairs, encouraged himself with a scream of triumph, and leapt rapidly over chair after chair, on his hands—his limbless body, now thrown back from the shoulders, and

now thrown forward to keep the balance, in a manner at once wonderful and horrible to behold. ‘Dexter’s Leapfrog!’ he cried, cheerfully, perching himself, with his bird-like lightness, on the last of the prostrate chairs, when he had reached the further end of the room. ‘I’m pretty active, Mrs. Valeria, considering I’m a cripple. Let us drink to the hanging of Mrs. Beaully, in another bottle of Burgundy!’

I seized desperately on the first excuse that occurred to me for getting away from him.

‘You forget,’ I said—‘I must go at once to the Major. If I don’t warn him in time, he may speak of me to Lady Clarinda by the wrong name.’

Ideas of hurry and movement were just the ideas to take his fancy, in his present state. He blew furiously on the whistle that summoned Ariel from the kitchen regions, and danced up and down on his hands in the full frenzy of his delight.

‘Ariel shall get you a cab!’ he cried. ‘Drive at a gallop to the Major’s. Set the

trap for her without losing a moment. Oh, what a day of days this has been! Oh, what a relief to get rid of my dreadful secret, and share it with You! I am suffocating with happiness—I am like the Spirit of the Earth in Shelley's poem.' He broke out with the magnificent lines in 'Prometheus Unbound,' in which the Earth feels the Spirit of Love, and bursts into speech. ' "The joy, the triumph, the delight, the madness! The boundless, overflowing, bursting gladness, The vaporous exultation not to be confined! Ha! ha! the animation of delight, Which wraps me like an atmosphere of light, And bears me as a cloud is borne by its own wind." That's how I feel, Valeria! that's how I feel!'

I crossed the threshold while he was still speaking. The last I saw of him, he was pouring out that glorious flood of words—his deformed body, poised on the overthrown chair, his face lifted in rapture to some fantastic Heaven of his own making. I slipped out softly into the antechamber. Even as I crossed the room,

he changed once more. I heard his ringing cry; I heard the soft thump-thump of his hands on the floor. He was going down the room again, in 'Dexter's Leapfrog,' flying over the prostrate chairs !

In the hall, Ariel was on the watch for me.

As I approached her, I happened to be putting on my gloves. She stopped me ; and taking my right arm, lifted my hand towards her face. Was she going to kiss it ? or to bite it ? Neither. She smelt it like a dog—and dropped it again with a hoarse chuckling laugh.

' You don't smell of his perfumes,' she said. ' You *haven't* touched his beard. *Now* I believe you. Want a cab ?'

' Thank you. I'll walk till I meet a cab.'

She was bent on being polite to me—now I had *not* touched his beard.

' I say !' she burst out, in her deepest notes.

' Yes ?'

' I'm glad I didn't upset you in the canal. There now !'

She gave me a friendly smack on the shoulder which nearly knocked me down—relapsed, the instant after, into her leaden stolidity of look and manner—and led the way out by the front door. I heard her hoarse chuckling laugh as she locked the gate behind me. My star was at last in the ascendant! In one and the same day, I had found my way into the confidence of Ariel, and Ariel's Master!

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE DEFENCE OF MRS. BEAULY.

THE days that elapsed before Major Fitz-David's dinner-party were precious days to me.

My long interview with Miserrimus Dexter had disturbed me far more seriously than I suspected at the time. It was not until some hours after I had left him, that I really began to feel how my nerves had been tried by all that I had seen and heard, during my visit at his house. I started at the slightest noises ; I dreamed of dreadful things ; I was ready to cry without reason, at one moment, and to fly into a passion without reason, at another. Absolute rest was what I wanted, and (thanks to my good Benjamin) was what I got. The dear old

man controlled his anxieties on my account, and spared me the questions which his fatherly interest in my welfare made him eager to ask. It was tacitly understood between us that all conversation on the subject of my visit to Miserrimus Dexter (of which, it is needless to say, he strongly disapproved), should be deferred until repose had restored my energies of body and mind. I saw no visitors. Mrs. Macallan came to the cottage, and Major Fitz-David came to the cottage—one of them to hear what had passed between Miserrimus Dexter and myself: the other to amuse me with the latest gossip about the guests at the forthcoming dinner. Benjamin took it on himself to make my apologies, and to spare me the exertion of receiving my visitors. We hired a little open carriage, and took long drives in the pretty country lanes, still left flourishing within a few miles of the northern suburb of London. At home, we sat and talked quietly of old times, or played at backgammon and dominoes—and so, for a few

happy days, led the peaceful, unadventurous life which was good for me. When the day of the dinner arrived, I felt restored to my customary health. I was ready again, and eager again, for the introduction to Lady Clarinda, and the discovery of Mrs. Beaully.

Benjamin looked a little sadly at my flushed face, as we drove to Major Fitz-David's house.

‘Ah, my dear,’ he said, in his simple way, ‘I see you are well again! You have had enough of our quiet life already.’

My recollection of events and persons, in general, at the dinner-party, is singularly indistinct. I remember that we were very merry, and as easy and familiar with one another as if we had been old friends. I remember that Madame Mirliflore was unapproachably superior to the other women present, in the perfect beauty of her dress, and in the ample justice which she did to the luxurious dinner set before us. I remember the Major's young prima-donna, more round-eyed, more over-dressed, more shrill and strident as the coming ‘Queen

of Song,' than ever. I remember the Major himself, always kissing our hands, always luring us to indulge in dainty dishes and drinks, always making love, always detecting resemblances between us, always 'under the charm,' and never once out of his character as elderly Don Juan, from the beginning of the evening to the end. I remember dear old Benjamin completely bewildered, shrinking into corners, blushing when he was personally drawn into the conversation, frightened at Madame Mirli-flore, bashful with Lady Clarinda, submissive to the Major, suffering under the music, and, from the bottom of his honest old heart, wishing himself home again. And there, as to the members of that cheerful little gathering, my memory finds its limits—with one exception. The appearance of Lady Clarinda is as present to me as if I had met her yesterday; and of the memorable conversation which we two held together privately, towards the close of the evening, it is no exaggeration to say

that I can still call to mind almost every word.

I see her dress, I hear her voice again, while I write.

She was attired, I remember, with that extreme assumption of simplicity which always defeats its own end, by irresistibly suggesting art. She wore plain white muslin, over white silk, without trimming or ornament of any kind. Her rich brown hair, dressed in defiance of the prevailing fashion, was thrown back from her forehead, and gathered into a simple knot behind, without adornment of any sort. A little white ribbon encircled her neck, fastened by the only article of jewellery that she wore—a tiny diamond brooch. She was unquestionably handsome; but her beauty was of the somewhat hard and angular type which is so often seen in English women of her race: the nose and chin too prominent and too firmly shaped; the well-opened grey eyes full of spirit and dignity, but wanting in tenderness and

mobility of expression. Her manner had all the charm which fine breeding can confer—exquisitely polite, easily cordial; showing that perfect yet unobtrusive confidence in herself, which (in England) seems to be the natural outgrowth of pre-eminent social rank. If you had accepted her for what she was, on the surface, you would have said, Here is the model of a noble woman who is perfectly free from pride. And if you had taken a liberty with her, on the strength of that conviction, she would have made you remember it to the end of your life.

We got on together admirably. I was introduced as ‘Mrs. Woodville,’ by previous arrangement with the Major, effected through Benjamin. Before the dinner was over, we had promised to exchange visits. Nothing but the opportunity was wanting to lead Lady Clarinda into talking, as I wanted her to talk, of Mrs. Beauuly.

Late in the evening, the opportunity came.

I had taken refuge from the terrible

bravura singing of the Major's strident prima-donna, in the back drawing-room. As I had hoped and anticipated, after a while, Lady Clarinda (missing me from the group round the piano) came in search of me. She seated herself by my side, out of sight and out of hearing of our friends in the front room ; and, to my infinite relief and delight, touched on the subject of Miserrimus Dexter, of her own accord. Something I had said of him, when his name had been accidentally mentioned at dinner, remained in her memory, and led us, by perfectly natural gradations, into speaking of Mrs. Beauly. 'At last,' I thought to myself, 'the Major's little dinner will bring me my reward !'

And what a reward it was, when it came ! My heart sinks in me again—as it sank on that never-to-be-forgotten evening—while I sit at my desk, thinking of it.

'So Dexter really spoke to you of Mrs. Beauly !' exclaimed Lady Clarinda. 'You have no idea how you surprise me.'

'May I ask why ?'

‘He hates her! The last time I saw him, he wouldn’t allow me to mention her name. It is one of his innumerable oddities. If any such feeling as sympathy is a possible feeling in such a nature as his, he ought to like Helena Beaulieu. She is the most completely unconventional person I know. When she does break out, poor dear, she says things and does things, which are almost reckless enough to be worthy of Dexter himself. I wonder whether you would like her?’

‘You have kindly asked me to visit you, Lady Clarinda. Perhaps I may meet her at your house?’

Lady Clarinda laughed as if the idea amused her.

‘I hope you will not wait until *that* is likely to happen,’ she said. ‘Helena’s last whim is to fancy that she has got—the gout, of all the maladies in the world! She is away at some wonderful baths in Hungary, or Bohemia (I don’t remember which)—and where she will go, or what she will do, next, it is perfectly impossible to say. Dear

Mrs. Woodville ! is the heat of the fire too much for you ? You are looking quite pale.'

I *felt* that I was looking pale. The discovery of Mrs. Beauly's absence from England was a shock for which I was quite unprepared. For the moment, it unnerved me.

'Shall we go into the other room ?' asked Lady Clarinda.

To go into the other room would be to drop the conversation. I was determined not to let that catastrophe happen. It was just possible that Mrs. Beauly's maid might have quitted her service, or might have been left behind in England. My information would not be complete, until I knew what had become of the maid. I pushed my chair back a little from the fire-place, and took a hand-screen from a table near me. It might be made useful in hiding my face, if any more disappointments were in store for me.

'Thank you, Lady Clarinda : I was only a little too near the fire. I shall do

admirably here. You surprise me about Mrs. Beauly. From what Mr. Dexter said to me, I had imagined——'

'Oh, you must not believe anything Dexter tells you!' interposed Lady Clarinda. 'He delights in mystifying people; and he purposely misled you, I have no doubt. If all that I hear is true, *he* ought to know more of Helena Beauly's strange freaks and fancies than most people. He all but discovered her, in one of her adventures (down in Scotland), which reminds me of the story in Auber's charming opera—what is it called? I shall forget my own name next! I mean the opera in which the two nuns slip out of the convent, and go to the ball. Listen! how very odd! That vulgar girl is singing the castanet song in the second act, at this moment. Major! what opera is the young lady singing from?'

The Major was scandalised at the interruption. He bustled into the back room—whispered 'Hush! hush! my dear lady. The *Domino Noir*'—and bustled back again to the piano.

‘Of course!’ said Lady Clarinda. ‘How stupid of me! The *Domino Noir*. And how strange that you should forget it too!’

I had remembered it perfectly; but I could not trust myself to speak. If, as I believed, the ‘adventure’ mentioned by Lady Clarinda was connected, in some way, with Mrs. Beauly’s mysterious proceedings on the morning of the twenty-first of October, I was on the brink of the very discovery which it was the one interest of my life to make! I held the screen so as to hide my face; and I said in the steadiest voice that I could command at the moment,

‘Pray go on! Pray tell me what the adventure was!’

Lady Clarinda was quite flattered by my eager desire to hear the coming narrative.

‘I hope my story will be worthy of the interest which you are so good as to feel in it,’ she said. ‘If you only knew Helena—it is *so* like her! I have it, you must know, from her maid. She has taken a woman

who speaks foreign languages with her to Hungary, and she has left the maid with me. A perfect treasure ! I should only be too glad if I could keep her in my service : she has but one defect, a name I hate—Phœbe. Well ! Phœbe and her mistress were staying at a place near Edinburgh, called (I think) Gleninch. The house belonged to that Mr. Macallan, who was afterwards tried—you remember it, of course?—for poisoning his wife. A dreadful case ; but don't be alarmed—my story has nothing to do with it ; my story has to do with Helena Beaulieu. One evening (while she was staying at Gleninch) she was engaged to dine with some English friends visiting Edinburgh. The same night—also in Edinburgh—there was a masked ball, given by somebody whose name I forget. The ball (almost an unparalleled event in Scotland !) was reported to be not at all a reputable affair. All sorts of amusing people were to be there. Ladies of doubtful virtue, you know ; and gentlemen on the outlying limits of society, and soon. Helena's friends

had contrived to get cards, and were going, in spite of the objections—in the strictest incognito, of course; trusting to their masks. And Helena herself was bent on going with them, if she could only manage it without being discovered at Gleninch. Mr. Macallan was one of the strait-laced people who disapproved of the ball. No lady, he said, could show herself at such an entertainment, without compromising her reputation. What stuff! Well, Helena, in one of her wildest moments, hit on a way of going to the ball without discovery, which was really as ingenious as a plot in a French play. She went to the dinner in the carriage from Gleninch, having sent Phœbe to Edinburgh before her. It was not a grand dinner—a little friendly gathering; no evening dress. When the time came for going back to Gleninch, what do you think Helena did? She sent her maid back in the carriage, instead of herself! Phœbe was dressed in her mistress's cloak and bonnet and veil. She was instructed to run upstairs the moment she got to the house; leaving on

the hall-table a little note of apology (written by Helena of course !) pleading fatigue as an excuse for not saying good night to her host. The mistress and the maid were about the same height ; and the servants naturally never discovered the trick. Phœbe got up to her mistress's room, safely enough. There, her instructions were to wait until the house was quiet for the night, and then to steal up to her own room. While she was waiting, the girl fell asleep. She only woke at two in the morning, or later. It didn't much matter, as she thought. She stole out on tip-toe, and closed the door behind her. Before she was at the end of the corridor, she fancied she heard something. She waited till she was safe on the upper storey, and then she looked over the banisters. There was Dexter—so like him !—hopping about on his hands (did you ever see it ? the most grotesquely-horrible exhibition you can imagine !)—there was Dexter, hopping about, and looking through keyholes—evidently in search of the person who had left her room at two

in the morning ; and no doubt taking Phœbe for her mistress, seeing that she had forgotten to take her mistress's cloak off her shoulders. The next morning early, Helena came back in a hired carriage from Edinburgh, with a hat and mantle borrowed from her English friends. She left the carriage in the road ; and got into the house by way of the garden—without being discovered, this time, by Dexter, or by anybody. Clever and daring, wasn't it ? And, as I said just now, quite a new version of the *Domino Noir*. You will wonder, as I did, how it was that Dexter didn't make mischief in the morning ? He would have done it no doubt. But even *he* was silenced (as Phœbe told me) by the dreadful event that happened in the house on the same day.—My dear Mrs. Woodville ! the heat of this room is certainly too much for you. Take my smelling-bottle. Let me open the window.'

I was just able to answer, ' Pray say nothing ! Let me slip out into the air ! '

I made my way unobserved to the land-

ing, and sat down on the stairs to compose myself, where nobody could see me. In a moment more, I felt a hand laid gently on my shoulder, and discovered good Benjamin looking at me in dismay. Lady Clarinda had considerably spoken to him, and had assisted him in quietly making his retreat from the room, while his host's attention was still absorbed by the music.

‘My dear child!’ he whispered, ‘what is the matter?’

‘Take me home, and I will tell you,’ was all that I could say.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A SPECIMEN OF MY WISDOM.

THE scene must follow my erratic movements—the scene must close on London for a while, and open in Edinburgh.

Two days had passed since Major Fitz-David's dinner-party. I was able to breathe again freely, after the utter destruction of all my plans for the future, and of all the hopes that I had founded on them. I could now see that I had been trebly in the wrong—wrong in hastily and cruelly suspecting an innocent woman; wrong in communicating my suspicions (without an attempt to verify them previously) to another person; wrong in accepting the flighty inferences and conclusions of Miserrimus Dexter as if they had been solid

truths. I was so ashamed of my folly, when I thought of the past ; so completely discouraged, so rudely shaken in my confidence in myself, when I thought of the future, that, for once in a way, I accepted sensible advice when it was offered to me. ‘My dear,’ said good old Benjamin, after we had thoroughly talked over my discomfiture on our return from the dinner-party, ‘judging by what you tell me of him, I don’t fancy Mr. Dexter. Promise me that you will not go back to him, until you have first consulted some person who is fitter to guide you through this dangerous business than I am.’

I gave him my promise, on one condition. ‘If I fail to find the person,’ I said, ‘will you undertake to help me?’

Benjamin pledged himself to help me, cheerfully.

The next morning, when I was brushing my hair, and thinking over my affairs, I called to mind a forgotten resolution of mine, at the time when I first read the Report of my husband’s Trial. I mean the reso-

lution—if Miserrimus Dexter failed me—to apply to one of the two agents (or solicitors, as we should term them) who had prepared Eustace's defence, namely, Mr. Playmore. This gentleman, it may be remembered, had especially recommended himself to my confidence by his friendly interference, when the sheriff's officers were in search of my husband's papers. Referring back to the evidence of 'Isaiah Schoolcraft,' I found that Mr. Playmore had been called in to assist and advise Eustace, by Miserrimus Dexter. He was therefore not only a friend on whom I might rely, but a friend who was personally acquainted with Dexter as well. Could there be a fitter man to apply to for enlightenment in the darkness that had now gathered round me? Benjamin, when I put the question to him, acknowledged that I had made a sensible choice on this occasion, and at once exerted himself to help me. He discovered (through his own lawyer) the address of Mr. Playmore's London agents; and from these

gentlemen he obtained for me a letter of introduction to Mr. Playmore himself. I had nothing to conceal from my new adviser; and I was properly described in the letter as Eustace Macallan's second wife.

The same evening, we two set forth (Benjamin refused to let me travel alone) by the night mail for Edinburgh.

I had previously written to Miserrimus Dexter (by my old friend's advice), merely saying that I had been unexpectedly called away from London for a few days, and that I would report to him the result of my interview with Lady Clarinda on my return. A characteristic answer was brought back to the cottage by Ariel. 'Mrs. Valeria, I happen to be a man of quick perceptions; and I can read the *unwritten* part of your letter. Lady Clarinda has shaken your confidence in me. Very good. I pledge myself to shake your confidence in Lady Clarinda. In the meantime, I am not offended. In serene composure I

wait the honour and the happiness of your visit. Send me word by telegraph, whether you would like Truffles again, or whether you would prefer something simpler and lighter — say that incomparable French dish, Pig's Eyelids and Tamarinds. Believe me always your ally and admirer, your poet and cook—DEXTER.'

Arrived in Edinburgh, Benjamin and I had a little discussion. The question in dispute between us was, whether I should go with him, or go alone, to Mr. Playmore. I was all for going alone.

'My experience of the world is not a very large one,' I said. 'But I have observed that, in nine cases out of ten, a man will make concessions to a woman, if she approaches him by herself, which he would hesitate even to consider, if another man was within hearing. I don't know how it is—I only know that it is so. If I find that I get on badly with Mr. Playmore, I will ask him for a second appointment, and, in that case, you shall accom-

pany me. Don't think me self-willed. Let me try my luck alone, and let us see what comes of it.'

Benjamin yielded, with his customary consideration for me. I sent my letter of introduction to Mr. Playmore's office—his private house being in the neighbourhood of Gleninch. My messenger brought back a polite answer, inviting me to visit him at an early hour in the afternoon. At the appointed time to the moment, I rang the bell at the office door.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A SPECIMEN OF MY FOLLY.

THE incomprehensible submission of Scotchmen to the ecclesiastical tyranny of their Established Church, has produced—not unnaturally as I think—a very mistaken impression of the national character in the popular mind.

Public opinion looks at the institution of ‘The Sabbath’ in Scotland; finds it unparalleled in Christendom for its senseless and savage austerity; sees a nation content to be deprived by its priesthood of every social privilege on one day in every week—bidden to travel; forbidden to telegraph; forbidden to eat a hot dinner; forbidden to read a newspaper; in short, allowed the use of two liberties only, the

liberty of exhibiting oneself at the Church, and the liberty of secluding oneself over the bottle—public opinion sees this, and arrives at the not unreasonable conclusion that the people who submit to such social laws as these are the most stolid, stern, and joyless people on the face of the earth. Such are Scotchmen supposed to be, when viewed at a distance. But how do Scotchmen appear when they are seen under a closer light, and judged by the test of personal experience? There are no people more cheerful, more companionable, more hospitable, more liberal in their ideas, to be found on the face of the civilised globe than the very people who submit to the Scotch Sunday! On the six days of the week, there is an atmosphere of quiet humour, a radiation of genial common sense, about Scotchmen in general, which is simply delightful to feel. But on the seventh day, these same men will hear one of their ministers seriously tell them that he views taking a walk on the Sabbath in the light of an act of profanity, and will be the only

people in existence who can let a man talk downright nonsense without laughing at him.

I am not clever enough to be able to account for this anomaly in the national character ; I can only notice it by way of necessary preparation for the appearance in my little narrative of a personage not frequently seen, in writing—a cheerful Scotchman.

In all other respects I found Mr. Playmore only negatively remarkable. He was neither old nor young, neither handsome nor ugly ; he was personally not in the least like the popular idea of a lawyer ; and he spoke perfectly good English, touched with only the slightest possible flavour of a Scotch accent.

‘ I have the honour to be an old friend of Mr. Macallan,’ he said, cordially shaking hands with me ; ‘ and I am honestly happy to become acquainted with Mr. Macallan’s wife. Where will you sit ? Near the light ? You are young enough not to be afraid of the daylight, just yet. Is this your

first visit to Edinburgh? Pray let me make it as pleasant to you as I can. I shall be delighted to present Mrs. Playmore to you. We are staying in Edinburgh for a little while. The Italian opera is here; and we have a box for to-night. Will you kindly waive all ceremony, and dine with us and go to the music afterwards?’

‘You are very kind,’ I answered. ‘But I have some anxieties just now which will make me a very poor companion for Mrs. Playmore at the opera. My letter to you mentions, I think, that I have to ask your advice on matters which are of very serious importance to me.’

‘Does it?’ he rejoined. ‘To tell you the truth I have not read the letter through. I observed your name in it, and I gathered from your message that you wished to see me here. I sent my note to your hotel—and then went on with something else. Pray pardon me. Is this a professional consultation? For your own sake, I sincerely hope not.’

‘It is hardly a professional consultation,

Mr. Playmore. I find myself in a very painful position ; and I come to you to advise me, under very unusual circumstances. I shall greatly surprise you when you hear what I have to say ; and I am afraid I shall occupy more than my fair share of your time.'

'I, and my time, are entirely at your disposal,' he said. 'Tell me what I can do for you—and tell it in your own way.'

The kindness of his language was more than matched by the kindness of his manner. I spoke to him freely and fully—I told him my strange story, exaggerating nothing, and suppressing nothing.

He showed the varying impressions that I produced on his mind, without the slightest concealment. My separation from Eustace distressed him. My resolution to dispute the Scotch Verdict, and my unjust suspicions of Mrs. Beauly, first amused, then surprised him. It was not, however, until I had described my extraordinary interview with Miserrimus Dexter, and my hardly less remarkable conversation with

Lady Clarinda, that I produced the greatest effect on the lawyer's mind. I saw him change colour for the first time. He started, and muttered to himself, as if he had completely forgotten me. 'Good God!' I heard him say—'Can it be possible? Does the truth lie *that* way, after all?'

I took the liberty of interrupting him. I had no idea of allowing him to keep his thoughts to himself.

'I seem to have surprised you?' I said.

He started at the sound of my voice.

'I beg ten thousand pardons!' he exclaimed. 'You have not only surprised me—you have opened an entirely new view to my mind. I see a possibility, a really startling possibility, in connection with the poisoning at Gleninch, which never occurred to me until the present moment. This is a nice state of things,' he added, falling back again into his ordinary humour. 'Here is the client leading the lawyer. My dear Mrs. Eustace, which is it—do you want my advice? or do I want yours?'

‘ May I hear the new idea ? ’ I asked.

‘ Not just yet, if you will excuse me, ’ he answered. ‘ Make allowances for my professional caution. I don’t want to be professional with You—my great anxiety is to avoid it. But the lawyer gets the better of the man, and refuses to be suppressed. I really hesitate to realise what is passing in my own mind, without some further enquiry. Do me a great favour. Let us go over a part of the ground again, and let me ask you some questions as we proceed. Do you feel any objection to obliging me in this matter ? ’

‘ Certainly not, Mr. Playmore. How far shall we go back ? ’

‘ To your visit to Dexter, with your mother-in-law. When you first asked him if he had any ideas of his own, on the subject of Mrs. Macallan’s death, did I understand you to say that he looked at you suspiciously ? ’

‘ Very suspiciously. ’

‘ And his face cleared up again, when you told him that your question was only

suggested by what you had read in the Report of the Trial ?’

‘ Yes.’

He drew a slip of paper out of the drawer in his desk, dipped his pen in the ink, considered a little, and placed a chair for me close at his side.

‘ The lawyer disappears,’ he said, ‘ and the man resumes his proper place. There shall be no professional mysteries between you and me. As your husband’s old friend, Mrs. Eustace, I feel no common interest in you. I see a serious necessity for warning you before it is too late ; and I can only do so to any good purpose, by running a risk on which few men in my place would venture. Personally and professionally, I am going to trust you—though I *am* a Scotchman and a lawyer ! Sit here, and look over my shoulder while I make my notes. You will see what is passing in my mind, if you see what I write.’

I sat down by him and looked over his shoulder, without the smallest pretence of hesitation.

He began to write as follows :—

‘ The poisoning at Gleninch. Queries :
In what position does Miserrimus Dexter stand towards the poisoning ? And what does he (presumably) know about that matter ?

‘ He has ideas which are secrets. He suspects that he has betrayed them, or that they have been discovered in some way, inconceivable to himself. He is palpably relieved when he finds that this is not the case.’

The pen stopped ; and the questions went on.

‘ Let us advance to your second visit,’ said Mr. Playmore, ‘ when you saw Dexter alone. Tell me again what he did, and how he looked, when you informed him that you were not satisfied with the Scotch Verdict.’

I repeated what I have already written. The pen went back to the paper again, and added these lines :—

‘ He hears nothing more remarkable than that a person visiting him, who is in-

terested in the case, refuses to accept the verdict at the Macallan Trial, as a final verdict, and proposes to re-open the enquiry. What does he do upon that ?

‘ He exhibits all the symptoms of a panic of terror ; he sees himself in some incomprehensible danger ; he is frantic at one moment, and servile at the next ; he must and will know what this disturbing person really means. And when he is informed on that point, he first turns pale and doubts the evidence of his own senses ; and next, with nothing said to justify it, gratuitously accuses his visitor of suspecting somebody. Query, here : When a small sum of money is missing in a household, and the servants in general are called together to be informed of the circumstance, what do we think of the one servant, in particular, who speaks first, and who says, “ Do you suspect *me* ? ” ’

He laid down the pen again.

‘ Is that right ? ’ he asked.

I began to see the end to which the notes were drifting. Instead of answering

his question, I entreated him to enter into the explanations that were still wanting to convince my own mind. He held up a warning forefinger, and stopped me.

‘Not yet,’ he said. ‘Once again, am I right—so far?’

‘Quite right.’

‘Very well. Now tell me what Dexter did next. Don’t mind repeating yourself. Give me all the details, one after another, to the end.’

I gave him all the details, exactly as I remembered them. Mr. Playmore returned to his writing for the third and last time. Thus the notes ended :—

‘He is indirectly assured that *he* at least is not the person suspected. He sinks back in his chair ; he draws a long breath ; he asks to be left awhile by himself, under the pretence that the subject excites him. When the visitor returns, Dexter has been drinking in the interval. The visitor resumes the subject—not Dexter. The visitor is convinced that Mrs. Eustace Macallan died by the hand of a poisoner,

and openly says so. Dexter sinks back in his chair like a man fainting. What is the horror that has got possession of him? It is easy to understand, if we call it guilty horror. It is beyond all understanding if we call it anything else. And how does it leave him? He flies from one extreme to another; he is indescribably delighted when he discovers that the visitor's suspicions are all fixed on an absent person. And then, and then only, he takes refuge in the declaration that he has been of one mind with his guest, in the matter of suspicion, from the first! These are facts. To what plain conclusion do they point?'

He shut up his notes, and, steadily watching my face, waited for me to speak first.

'I understand you, Mr. Playmore,' I began, impetuously. 'You believe that Mr. Dexter——'

His warning forefinger stopped me there.

'Tell me,' he interposed, 'what Dexter

said to you when he was so good as to confirm your opinion of poor Mrs. Beaully ?’

‘ He said, “ There isn’t a doubt about it. Mrs. Beaully poisoned her.” ’

‘ I can’t do better than follow so good an example—with one trifling difference. I say too, There isn’t a doubt about it! Dexter poisoned her.’

‘ Are you joking, Mr. Playmore ? ’

‘ I never was more in earnest in my life. Your rash visit to Dexter, and your extraordinary imprudence in taking him into your confidence, have led to astonishing results. The light which the whole machinery of the Law was unable to throw on the poisoning case at Gleninch, has been accidentally let in on it, by a Lady who refuses to listen to reason and who insists on having her own way. Quite incredible, and nevertheless quite true ! ’

‘ Impossible ! ’ I exclaimed.

‘ What is impossible ? ’ he asked, coolly.

‘ That Dexter poisoned my husband’s first wife.’

‘And why is that impossible, if you please?’

I began to be almost enraged with Mr. Playmore.

‘Can you ask the question?’ I replied, indignantly. ‘I have told you that I heard him speak of her, in terms of respect and affection of which any woman might be proud. He lives in the memory of her. I owe his friendly reception of me to some resemblance which he fancies he sees between my figure and hers. I have seen tears in his eyes, I have heard his voice falter and fail him, when he spoke of her. He may be the falsest of men in all besides; but he is true to *her*—he has not misled me in that one thing. There are signs that never deceive a woman, when a man is talking to her of what is really near his heart. I saw those signs. It is as true that I poisoned her, as that he did. I am ashamed to set my opinion against yours, Mr. Playmore; but I really cannot help it. I declare I am almost angry with you!’

He seemed to be pleased, instead of

offended, by the bold manner in which I expressed myself.

‘My dear Mrs. Eustace, you have no reason to be angry with me! In one respect, I entirely share your view—with this difference, that I go a little further than you do.’

‘I don’t understand you.’

‘You will understand me directly. You describe Dexter’s feeling for the late Mrs. Eustace, as a happy mixture of respect and affection. I can tell you, it was a much warmer feeling towards her than that. I have my information from the poor lady herself—who honoured me with her confidence and friendship for the best part of her life. Before she married Mr. Macallan—she kept it a secret from him, and you had better keep it a secret too—Miserrimus Dexter was in love with her. Miserrimus Dexter asked her—deformed as he was, seriously asked her—to be his wife.’

‘And in the face of that,’ I cried, ‘you say that he poisoned her!’

‘I do. I see no other conclusion possible,

after what happened during your visit to him. You all but frightened him into a fainting-fit. What was he afraid of ?'

I tried hard to find an answer to that. I even embarked on an answer, without quite knowing where my own words might lead me.

'Mr. Dexter is an old and true friend of my husband's,' I began. 'When he heard me say I was not satisfied with the Verdict, he might have felt alarmed——'

'He might have felt alarmed at the possible consequences to your husband of re-opening the enquiry,' said Mr. Playmore, ironically finishing the sentence for me. 'Rather far-fetched, Mrs. Eustace ! and not very consistent with your faith in your husband's innocence ! Clear your mind of one mistake,' he continued, seriously, 'which may fatally mislead you, if you persist in pursuing your present course. Miserrimus Dexter, you may take my word for it, ceased to be your husband's friend on the day when your husband married his first wife. Dexter has kept up appearances, I

grant you—both in public and in private. His evidence in his friend's favour at the Trial, was given with the deep feeling which everybody expected from him. Nevertheless I firmly believe, looking under the surface, that Mr. Macallan has no bitterer enemy living than Miserrimus Dexter.'

He turned me cold. I felt that here, at least, he was right. My husband had wooed and won the woman who had refused Dexter's offer of marriage. Was Dexter the man to forgive that? My own experience answered me—and said, No.

'Bear in mind what I have told you,' Mr. Playmore proceeded. 'And now let us get on to your own position in this matter, and to the interests that you have at stake. Try to adopt my point of view for the moment; and let us enquire what chance we have of making any further advance towards a discovery of the truth. It is one thing to be morally convinced (as I am) that Miserrimus Dexter is the man

who ought to have been tried for the murder at Gleninch ; and it is another thing, at this distance of time, to lay our hands on the plain evidence which can alone justify anything like a public assertion of his guilt. There, as I see it, is the insuperable difficulty in the case. Unless I am completely mistaken, the question is now narrowed to this plain issue : The public assertion of your husband's innocence depends entirely on the public assertion of Dexter's guilt. How are you to arrive at that result ? There is not a particle of evidence against him. You can only convict Dexter, on Dexter's own confession. Are you listening to me ?'

I was listening, most unwillingly. If he was right, things had indeed come to that terrible pass. But I could not—with all my respect for his superior knowledge and experience—I could not persuade myself that he *was* right. And I owned it, with the humility which I really felt.

He smiled good-humouredly.

'At any rate,' he said, 'you will admit

that Dexter has not freely opened his mind to you, thus far ? He is still keeping something from your knowledge, which you are interested in discovering ?’

‘ Yes. I admit that.’

‘ Very good. What applies to your view of the case, applies to mine. I say, he is keeping from you the confession of his guilt. You say, he is keeping from you information which may fasten the guilt on some other person. Let us start from that point. Confession, or information, how are you to get at what he is now withholding from you ? What influence can you bring to bear on him, when you see him again ?’

‘ Surely, I might persuade him ?’

‘ Certainly. And if persuasion fails—what then ? Do you think you can entrap him into speaking out ? or terrify him into speaking out ?’

‘ If you will look at your notes, Mr. Playmore, you will see that I have already succeeded in terrifying him—though I am only a woman, and though I didn’t mean to do it.’

‘Very well answered ! You mark the trick. What you have done once, you think you can do again. Well ! as you are determined to try the experiment, it can do you no harm to know a little more of Dexter than you know now. Before you go back to London, suppose we apply for information to somebody who can help us ?’

I started, and looked round the room. He made me do it : he spoke as if the person who was to help us was close at our elbows.

‘Don’t be alarmed,’ he said. ‘The oracle is silent ; and the oracle is here.’

He unlocked one of the drawers of his desk ; produced a bundle of letters ; and picked out one.

‘When we were arranging your husband’s defence,’ he said, ‘we felt some difficulty about including Miserrimus Dexter among our witnesses. We had not the slightest suspicion of him—I need hardly tell you. But we were all afraid of

his eccentricity ; and some among us even feared that the excitement of appearing at the Trial might drive him completely out of his mind. In this emergency we applied to a doctor to help us. Under some pretext which I forget now, we introduced him to Dexter. And in due course of time we received his report. Here it is.'

He opened the letter ; and, marking a certain passage in it with a pencil, handed it to me.

'Read the lines which I have marked,' he said ; 'they will be quite sufficient for our purpose.'

I read these words :—

'Summing up the results of my observation, I may give it as my opinion that there is undoubtedly latent insanity in this case ; but that no active symptoms of madness have presented themselves as yet. You may, I think, produce him at the Trial, without fear of consequences. He may say and do all sorts of odd things ; but he has his mind under the control of his will,

and you may trust his self-esteem to exhibit him in the character of a substantially intelligent witness.

‘ As to the future, I am, of course, not able to speak positively. I can only state my views.

‘ That he will end in madness (if he lives), I entertain little or no doubt. The question of *when* the madness will show itself, depends entirely on the state of his health. His nervous system is highly sensitive; and there are signs that his way of life has already damaged it. If he conquers the bad habits to which I have alluded in an earlier part of my report, and if he passes many hours of every day quietly in the open air, he may last as a sane man for years to come. If he persists in his present way of life—or, in other words, if further mischief occurs to that sensitive nervous system—his lapse into insanity must infallibly take place when the mischief has reached its culminating point. Without warning to himself or to others, the whole mental structure will give way; and, at a

moment's notice, while he is acting as quietly or speaking as intelligently as at his best time, the man will drop (if I may use the expression) into madness or idiocy. In either case, when the catastrophe has happened, it is only due to his friends to add, that they can (as I believe) entertain no hope of his cure. The balance once lost, will be lost for life.'

There it ended. Mr. Playmore put the letter back in his drawer.

'You have just read the opinion of one of our highest living authorities,' he said. 'Does Dexter strike you as a likely man to give his nervous system a chance of recovery? Do you see no obstacles and no perils in your way?'

My silence answered him.

'Suppose you go back to Dexter,' he proceeded. 'And suppose that the doctor's opinion exaggerates the peril, in his case. What are you to do? The last time you saw him, you had the immense advantage of taking him by surprise. Those sensitive nerves of his gave way; and he betrayed

the fear that you roused in him. Can you take him by surprise again? Not you! He is prepared for you now; and he will be on his guard. If you encounter nothing worse, you will have his cunning to deal with, next. Are you his match at that? But for Lady Clarinda he would have hopelessly misled you on the subject of Mrs. Beaully.'

There was no answering this, either. I was foolish enough to try to answer it, for all that.

'He told me the truth, so far as he knew it,' I rejoined. 'He really saw, what he said he saw, in the corridor at Gleninch.'

'He told you the truth,' returned Mr. Playmore, 'because he was cunning enough to see that the truth would help him in irritating your suspicions. You don't really believe that he shared your suspicions?'

'Why not?' I said. 'He was as ignorant of what Mrs. Beaully was really doing on that night, as I was—until I met Lady

Clarinda. It remains to be seen, whether he will not be as much astonished as I was, when I tell him what Lady Clarinda told me.'

This smart reply produced an effect which I had not anticipated.

To my surprise, Mr. Playmore abruptly dropped all further discussion on his side. He appeared to despair of convincing me, and he owned it indirectly in his next words.

'Will nothing that I can say to you,' he asked, 'induce you to think as I think in this matter?'

'I have not your ability, or your experience,' I answered. 'I am sorry to say, I can't think as you think.'

'And are you really determined to see Miserrimus Dexter again?'

'I have engaged myself to see him again.'

He waited a little, and thought over it.

'You have honoured me by asking for my advice,' he said. 'I earnestly advise you, Mrs. Eustace, to break your engage-

ment. I go even further than that. I *entreat* you not to see Dexter again.'

Just what my mother-in-law had said ! just what Benjamin and Major Fitz-David had said ! They were all against me. And still I held out. I wonder, when I look back at it, at my own obstinacy. I am almost ashamed to relate that I made Mr. Playmore no reply. He waited, still looking at me. I felt irritated by that fixed look. I rose, and stood before him with my eyes on the floor.

He rose in his turn. He understood that the conference was over.

'Well ! well !' he said, with a kind of sad good-humour, 'I suppose it is unreasonable of me to expect that a young woman like you should share any opinion with an old lawyer like me. Let me only remind you that our conversation must remain strictly confidential, for the present—and then let us change the subject. Is there anything that I can do for you ? Are you alone in Edinburgh ?'

'No. I am travelling with an old

friend of mine, who has known me from childhood.'

'And do you stay here to-morrow?'

'I think so.'

'Will you do me one favour? Will you think over what has passed between us, and will you come back to me in the morning?'

'Willingly, Mr. Playmore, if it is only to thank you again for your kindness.'

On that understanding we parted. He sighed—the cheerful man sighed—as he opened the door for me. Women are contradictory creatures. That sigh affected me more than all his arguments. I felt myself blush for my own headstrong resistance to him, as I took my leave and turned away into the street.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

GLENINCH.

I FOUND Benjamin at the hotel, poring over a cheap periodical ; absorbed in guessing one of the weekly ' Enigmas ' which the Editor presented to his readers. My old friend was a great admirer of these verbal ' puzzles,' and had won all sorts of cheap prizes by his ingenuity in arriving at the right solution of the problems submitted to him. On ordinary occasions, it was useless to attempt to attract his attention, while he was occupied with his favourite amusement. But his interest in hearing the result of my interview with the lawyer proved to be even keener than his interest in solving the problem before him. He shut up his journal the moment I entered the

room, and asked, eagerly, 'What news, Valeria? What news?'

In telling him what had happened, I of course respected Mr. Playmore's confidence in me. Not a word relating to the lawyer's horrible suspicion of Miserrimus Dexter passed my lips.

'Aha!' said Benjamin, complacently. 'So the lawyer thinks as I do. You will listen to Mr. Playmore (won't you?), though you wouldn't listen to me?'

'You must forgive me, my old friend,' I replied. 'I am afraid it has come to this—try as I may, I can listen to nobody who advises me. On our way here, I honestly meant to be guided by Mr. Playmore—we should never have taken this long journey, if I had *not* honestly meant it. I have tried, tried hard, to be a teachable, reasonable woman. But there is something in me that won't be taught. I am afraid I shall go back to Dexter.'

Even Benjamin lost all patience with me, this time.

'What is bred in the bone,' he said,

quoting the old proverb, 'will never come out of the flesh. In years gone by, you were the most obstinate child that ever made a mess in a nursery. Oh, dear me, we might as well have stayed in London!'

'No,' I replied, 'now we have travelled to Edinburgh, we will see something (interesting to *me* at any rate), which we should never have seen if we had not left London. My husband's country house is within a few miles of us, here. To-morrow we will go to Gleninch.'

'Where the poor lady was poisoned?' asked Benjamin, with a look of dismay. 'You mean that place?'

'Yes. I want to see the room in which she died; I want to go all over the house.'

Benjamin crossed his hands resignedly on his lap. 'I try to understand the new generation,' said the old man, sadly. 'But I can't manage it. The new generation beats me.'

I sat down to write to Mr. Playmore about the visit to Gleninch. The house in

which the tragedy had occurred that had blighted my husband's life, was, to my mind, the most interesting house on the habitable globe. The prospect of visiting Gleninch had, indeed (to tell the truth), strongly influenced my resolution to consult the Edinburgh lawyer. I sent my note to Mr. Playmore by a messenger, and received the kindest reply in return. If I would wait until the afternoon, he would get the day's business done, and would take us to Gleninch in his own carriage.

Benjamin's obstinacy—in its own quiet way, and on certain occasions only—was quite a match for mine. He had privately determined, as one of the old generation, to have nothing to do with Gleninch. Not a word on the subject escaped him, until Mr. Playmore's carriage was at the hotel door. At that appropriate moment, Benjamin remembered an old friend of his in Edinburgh. 'Will you please to excuse me, Valeria? My friend's name is Saunders—and he will take it unkindly of me, if I don't dine with him to-day.'

Apart from the associations that I connected with it, there was nothing to interest a traveller at Gleninch.

The country round was pretty and well cultivated, and nothing more. The park was, to an English eye, wild and badly kept. The house had been built within the last seventy or eighty years. Outside, it was as bare of all ornament as a factory, and as gloomily heavy in effect as a prison. Inside, the deadly dreariness, the close oppressive solitude, of a deserted dwelling wearied the eye and weighed on the mind, from the roof to the basement. The house had been shut up since the time of the Trial. A lonely old couple, man and wife, had the keys, and the charge of it. The man shook his head in silent and sorrowful disapproval of our intrusion, when Mr. Playmore ordered him to open the doors and shutters, and let the light in on the dark, deserted place. Fires were burning in the library and the picture gallery, to preserve the treasures which they contained from the damp. It was not easy, at first, to look

at the cheerful blaze, without fancying that the inhabitants of the house must surely come in and warm themselves ! Ascending to the upper floor, I saw the rooms made familiar to me by the Report of the Trial. I entered the little study, with the old books on the shelves, and the key still missing from the locked door of communication with the bedchamber. I looked into the room in which the unhappy mistress of Gleninch had suffered and died. The bed was left in its place ; the sofa on which the nurse had snatched her intervals of repose was at its foot : the Indian cabinet, in which the crumpled paper with the grains of arsenic had been found, still held its little collection of curiosities. I moved on its pivot the invalid table on which she had taken her meals, and written her poems, poor soul. The place was dreary and dreadful ; the heavy air felt as if it was still burdened with its horrid load of misery and distrust. I was glad to get out (after a passing glance at the room which Eustace had occupied, in those days) into the

Guests' Corridor. There was the bedroom, at the door of which Miserrimus Dexter had waited and watched! There was the oaken floor along which he had hopped, in his horrible way, following the footsteps of the servant disguised in her mistress's clothes! Go where I might, the ghosts of the dead and the absent went with me, step by step. Go where I might, the lonely horror of the house had its still and awful voice for Me:—'*I keep the secret of the Poison! I hide the mystery of the death!*'

The oppression of the place became unendurable. I longed for the pure sky, and the free air. My companion noticed and understood me.

'Come!' he said. 'We have had enough of the house. Let us look at the grounds.'

In the grey quiet of the evening, we roamed about the lonely gardens, and threaded our way through the rank, neglected shrubberies. Wandering here and wandering there, we drifted into the kitchen garden—with one little patch still sparely

cultivated by the old man and his wife, and all the rest a wilderness of weeds. Beyond the far end of the garden, divided from it by a low paling of wood, there stretched a piece of waste ground, sheltered on three sides by trees. In one lost corner of the ground, an object, common enough elsewhere, attracted my attention here. The object was a dust-heap. The great size of it, and the curious situation in which it was placed, roused a moment's languid curiosity in me. I stopped, and looked at the dust and ashes, at the broken crockery and the old iron. Here, there was a torn hat; and there, some fragments of rotten old boots; and, scattered round, a small attendant litter of waste paper and frowsy rags.

‘What are you looking at?’ asked Mr. Playmore.

‘At nothing more remarkable than the dust-heap,’ I answered.

‘In tidy England, I suppose you would have all that carted away, out of sight,’ said the lawyer. ‘We don’t mind in Scotland,

as long as the dust-heap is far enough away not to be smelt at the house. Besides, some of it, sifted, comes in usefully as manure for the garden. Here, the place is deserted, and the rubbish in consequence has not been disturbed. Everything at Gleninch, Mrs. Eustace (the big dust-heap included), is waiting for the new mistress to set it to rights. One of these days, you may be queen here—who knows?’

‘I have done with Gleninch, Mr. Playmore, when I leave it to-day!’

‘Don’t be too sure of that,’ returned my companion. ‘Time has its surprises in store for all of us.’

We turned away, and walked back in silence to the park gate, at which the carriage was waiting.

On the return to Edinburgh, Mr. Playmore directed the conversation to topics entirely unconnected with my visit to Gleninch. He saw that my mind stood in need of relief; and he most goodnaturedly, and successfully, exerted himself to amuse me. It was not until we were close to the city

that he touched on the subject of my return to London.

‘Have you decided yet on the day when you leave Edinburgh?’ he asked.

‘We leave Edinburgh,’ I replied, ‘by the train of to-morrow morning.’

‘Do you still see no reason to alter the opinions which you expressed yesterday? Does your speedy departure mean that?’

‘I am afraid it does, Mr. Playmore. When I am an older woman, I may be a wiser woman. In the meantime, I can only trust to your indulgence if I still blindly blunder on, in my own way.’

He smiled pleasantly, and patted my hand—then changed on a sudden, and looked at me gravely and attentively, before he opened his lips again.

‘This is my last opportunity of speaking to you before you go,’ he said. ‘May I speak freely?’

‘As freely as you please, Mr. Playmore! Whatever you may say to me, will only add to my grateful sense of your kindness.’

‘ I have very little to say, Mrs. Eustace—and that little begins with a word of caution. You told me yesterday that, when you paid your last visit to Miserrimus Dexter, you went to him alone. Don’t do that again. Take somebody with you.’

‘ Do you think I am in any danger, then ?’

‘ Not in the ordinary sense of the word. I only think that a friend may be useful in keeping Dexter’s audacity (he is one of the most impudent men living) within proper limits. Then, again, in case anything worth remembering and acting on *should* fall from him in his talk, a friend may be valuable as witness. In your place, I should have a witness with me who could take notes—but then I am a lawyer, and my business is to make a fuss about trifles. Let me only say—go with a companion, when you next visit Dexter ; and be on your guard against yourself, when the talk turns on Mrs. Beaulieu.’

‘ On my guard against myself ? What do you mean ?’

‘Practice, my dear Mrs. Eustace, has given me an eye for the little weaknesses of human nature. You are (quite naturally) disposed to be jealous of Mrs. Beaully; and you are, in consequence, not in full possession of your excellent common sense, when Dexter uses that lady as a means of blind-folding you. Am I speaking too freely?’

‘Certainly not! It is very degrading to me to be jealous of Mrs. Beaully. My vanity suffers dreadfully when I think of it. But my common sense yields to conviction. I dare say you are right.’

‘I am delighted to find that we agree on one point,’ he rejoined, drily. ‘I don’t despair yet of convincing you, in that far more serious matter which is still in dispute between us. And, what is more, if you will throw no obstacles in the way, I look to Dexter himself to help me.’

This roused my curiosity. How Miserrimus Dexter could help him, in that or in any other way, was a riddle beyond my reading.

‘You propose to repeat to Dexter all

that Lady Clarinda told you about Mrs. Beauly,' he went on. 'And you think it is likely that Dexter will be overwhelmed, as you were overwhelmed, when he hears the story. I am going to venture on a prophecy. I say that Dexter will disappoint you. Far from showing any astonishment, he will boldly tell you that you have been duped by a deliberately false statement of facts, invented and set afloat, in her own guilty interests, by Mrs. Beauly. Now tell me—if he really tries, in that way, to renew your unfounded suspicion of an innocent woman, will *that* shake your confidence in your own opinion?'

'It will entirely destroy my confidence in my own opinion, Mr. Playmore.'

'Very good. I shall expect you to write to me, in any case; and I believe we shall be of one mind, before the week is out. Keep strictly secret all that I said to you yesterday about Dexter. Don't even mention my name, when you see him. Thinking of him as I think now, I would

as soon touch the hand of the hangman as the hand of that monster! God bless you. Good bye.'

So he said his farewell words, at the door of the hotel. Kind, genial, clever—but oh, how easily prejudiced, how shockingly obstinate in holding to his own opinion! And *what* an opinion! I shuddered as I thought of it.

CHAPTER XXXV.

MR. PLAYMORE'S PROPHECY.

WE reached London between eight and nine in the evening. Strictly methodical in all his habits, Benjamin had telegraphed to his housekeeper, from Edinburgh, to have supper ready for us by ten o'clock, and to send the cabman whom he always employed to meet us at the station.

Arriving at the villa, we were obliged to wait for a moment to let a pony-chaise get by us before we could draw up at Benjamin's door. The chaise passed very slowly, driven by a rough-looking man, with a pipe in his mouth. But for the man, I might have doubted whether the pony was quite a stranger to me. As things were, I thought no more of the matter.

Benjamin's respectable old housekeeper opened the garden gate, and startled me by bursting into a devout ejaculation of gratitude at the sight of her master. 'The Lord be praised, Sir!' she cried. 'I thought you would never come back!'

'Anything wrong?' asked Benjamin, in his own impenetrably quiet way.

The housekeeper trembled at the question, and answered in these enigmatical words:—

'My mind's upset, Sir; and whether things are wrong or whether things are right, is more than I can say. Hours ago, a strange man came in and asked'—she stopped as if she was completely bewildered—looked for a moment vacantly at her master—and suddenly addressed herself to me. 'And asked,' she proceeded, 'when *you* was expected back, ma'am. I told him what my master had telegraphed, and the man says upon that, 'Wait a bit' (he says); 'I'm coming back.' He came back in a minute or less; and he carried a Thing in his arms which curdled my blood

—it did!—and set me shaking from the crown of my head to the sole of my foot. I know I ought to have stopped it; but I couldn't stand upon my legs—much less put the man out of the house. In he went, without *with* your leave, or *by* your leave, Mr. Benjamin, Sir—in he went with the Thing in his arms, straight through to your library. And there It has been all these hours. And there It is now. I've spoken to the Police; but they wouldn't interfere—and what to do next, is more than my poor head can tell. Don't you go in by yourself, ma'am! You'll be frightened out of your wits—you will!'

I persisted in entering the house, for all that. Aided by the pony, I easily solved the mystery of the housekeeper's otherwise unintelligible narrative. Passing through the dining-room (where the supper table was already laid for us), I looked through the half-opened library door.

Yes; there was Miserrimus Dexter, arrayed in his pink jacket, fast asleep in Benjamin's favourite arm-chair! No cover-

lid hid his horrible deformity. Nothing was sacrificed to conventional ideas of propriety, in his extraordinary dress. I could hardly wonder that the poor old housekeeper trembled from head to foot when she spoke of him !

‘Valeria !’ said Benjamin, pointing to the Portent in the chair. ‘Which is it—an Indian idol ? or a man ?’

I have already described Miserrimus Dexter as possessing the sensitive ear of a dog. He now showed that he also slept the light sleep of a dog. Quietly as Benjamin had spoken, the strange voice roused him on the instant. He rubbed his eyes, and smiled as innocently as a waking child.

‘How do you do, Mrs. Valeria ?’ he said. ‘I have had a nice little sleep. You don’t know how happy I am to see you again. Who is this ?’

He rubbed his eyes once more, and looked at Benjamin. Not knowing what else to do in this extraordinary emergency, I presented my visitor to the master of the house.

‘Excuse my getting up, Sir,’ said Miserrimus Dexter. ‘I can’t get up—I have got no legs. You look as if you thought I was occupying your chair? If I am committing an intrusion, be so good as to put your umbrella under me, and give me a jerk. I shall fall on my hands, and I shan’t be offended with you. I will submit to a tumble and a scolding—but please don’t break my heart by sending me away. That beautiful woman, there, can be very cruel sometimes, Sir, when the fit takes her. She went away when I stood in the sorest need of a little talk with her—she went away, and left me to my loneliness and my suspense. I am a poor deformed wretch, with a warm heart, and (perhaps) an insatiable curiosity as well. Insatiable curiosity (have you ever felt it?) is a curse. I bore it till my brains began to boil in my head; and then I sent for my gardener, and made him drive me here. I like being here. The air of your library soothes me; the sight of Mrs. Valeria is balm to my wounded heart. She has

something to tell me—something that I am dying to hear. If she is not too tired after her journey, and if you will let her tell it, I promise to have myself taken away when she has done. Dear Mr. Benjamin, you look like the refuge of the afflicted. I am afflicted. Shake hands like a good Christian, and take me in.'

He held out his hand. His soft blue eyes melted into an expression of piteous entreaty. Completely stupefied by the amazing harangue of which he had been made the object, Benjamin took the offered hand, with the air of a man in a dream. 'I hope I see you well, Sir,' he said, mechanically—and then looked round at me to know what he was to do next.

'I understand Mr. Dexter,' I whispered. 'Leave him to me.'

Benjamin stole a last bewildered look at the Object in the chair; bowed to it, with the instinct of politeness which never failed him; and (still with the air of a man in a dream) withdrew into the next room.

Left together, we looked at each other, for the first moment, in silence.

Whether I unconsciously drew on that inexhaustible store of indulgence which a woman always keeps in reserve for a man who owns that he has need of her—or whether, resenting as I did Mr. Playmore's horrible suspicion of him, my heart was especially accessible to feelings of compassion, in his unhappy case—I cannot tell. I only know that I pitied Miserrimus Dexter, at that moment, as I had never pitied him yet; and that I spared him the reproof which I should certainly have administered to any other man, who had taken the liberty of establishing himself, uninvited, in Benjamin's house.

He was the first to speak.

‘Lady Clarinda has destroyed your confidence in me!’ he began, wildly.

‘Lady Clarinda has done nothing of the sort,’ I replied. ‘She has not attempted to influence my opinion. I was really obliged to leave London, as I told you.’

He sighed, and closed his eyes content-

edly, as if I had relieved him of a heavy weight of anxiety.

‘Be merciful to me,’ he said; ‘and tell me something more. I have been so miserable in your absence.’ He suddenly opened his eyes again, and looked at me with an appearance of the greatest interest. ‘Are you very much fatigued by travelling?’ he proceeded. ‘I am hungry for news of what happened at the Major’s dinner-party. Is it cruel of me to tell you so, when you have not rested after your journey? Only one question to-night! and I will leave the rest till to-morrow. What did Lady Clarinda say about Mrs. Beauly? All that you wanted to hear?’

‘All, and more,’ I answered.

‘What? what? what?’ he cried, wild with impatience in a moment.

Mr. Playmore’s last prophetic words were vividly present to my mind. He had declared, in the most positive manner, that Dexter would persist in misleading me, and would show no signs of astonishment when I repeated what Lady Clarinda had

told me of Mrs. Beaully. I resolved to put the lawyer's prophecy—so far as the question of astonishment was concerned—to the sharpest attainable test. I said not a word to Miserrimus Dexter, in the way of preface or preparation ; I burst on him with my news as abruptly as possible.

‘The person you saw in the corridor was *not* Mrs. Beaully,’ I said. ‘It was the maid, dressed in her mistress's cloak and hat. Mrs. Beaully herself was not in the house at all. Mrs. Beaully herself was dancing at a masked ball in Edinburgh. There is what the maid told Lady Clarinda ; and there is what Lady Clarinda told *me*.’

In the absorbing interest of the moment, I poured out those words one after another as fast as they could pass my lips. Miserrimus Dexter completely falsified the lawyer's prediction. He shuddered under the shock. His eyes opened wide with amazement. ‘Say it again !’ he cried. ‘I can't take it all in at once. You stun me.’

I was more than contented with this

result—I triumphed in my victory. For once, I had really some reason to feel satisfied with myself. I had taken the Christian and merciful side in my discussion with Mr. Playmore ; and I had won my reward. I could sit in the same room with Miserrimus Dexter, and feel the blessed conviction that I was not breathing the same air with a poisoner. Was it not worth the visit to Edinburgh to have made sure of that ?

In repeating, at his own desire, what I had already said to him, I took care to add the details which made Lady Clarinda's narrative coherent and credible. He listened throughout with breathless attention—here and there repeating the words after me to impress them the more surely and the more deeply on his mind.

‘What is to be said ? what is to be done ?’ he asked, with a look of blank despair. ‘I can’t disbelieve it. From first to last, strange as it is, it sounds true.’

(How would Mr. Playmore have felt, if he had heard those words ? I did him the

justice to believe that he would have felt heartily ashamed of himself !)

‘ There is nothing to be said,’ I rejoined ;
‘ except that Mrs. Beaully is innocent, and that you and I have done her a grievous wrong. Don’t you agree with me ? ’

‘ I entirely agree with you,’ he answered, without an instant’s hesitation. ‘ Mrs. Beaully is an innocent woman. The defence at the Trial was the right defence after all.’

He folded his arms complacently ; he looked perfectly satisfied to leave the matter there.

I was not of his mind. To my own amazement, I now found myself the least reasonable person of the two !

Miserrimus Dexter (to use the popular phrase) had given me more than I had bargained for. He had not only done all that I had anticipated, in the way of falsifying Mr. Playmore’s prediction—he had actually advanced beyond my limits. I could go the length of recognising Mrs. Beaully’s innocence ; but at that point I stopped. If

the Defence at the Trial was the right defence—farewell to all hope of asserting my husband's innocence! I held to that hope, as I held to my love and my life.

‘Speak for yourself,’ I said. ‘My opinion of the Defence remains unchanged.’

He started and knit his brows as if I had disappointed and displeased him.

‘Does that mean that you are determined to go on?’

‘It does.’

He was downright angry with me. He cast his customary politeness to the winds.

‘Absurd! Impossible!’ he cried, contemptuously. ‘You have yourself declared that we wronged an innocent woman, when we suspected Mrs. Beaully. Is there anyone else whom we can suspect? It is ridiculous to ask the question! There is no alternative left but to accept the facts as they are, and to stir no further in the matter of the poisoning at Gleninch. It is childish to dispute plain conclusions. You *must* give up.’

‘You may be angry with me, if you

will, Mr. Dexter. Neither your anger nor your arguments will make me give up.'

He controlled himself by an effort—he was quiet and polite again, when he next spoke to me.

'Very well. Pardon me for a moment, if I absorb myself in my own thoughts. I want to do something which I have not done yet.'

'What may that be, Mr. Dexter?'

'I am going to put myself into Mrs. Beaul's skin, and to think with Mrs. Beaul's mind. Give me a minute. Thank you.'

What did he mean? What new transformation of him was passing before my eyes? Was there ever such a puzzle of a man as this? Who that saw him now, intently pursuing his new train of thought, would have recognised him as the childish creature who had woke up so innocently, and who had amazed Benjamin by the infantine nonsense which he talked? It is said, and said truly, that there are many sides to every human character. Dexter's

many sides were developing themselves at such a rapid rate of progress, that they were already beyond my counting!

He lifted his head, and fixed a look of keen enquiry on me.

‘I have come out of Mrs. Beaully’s skin,’ he announced. ‘And I have arrived at this result:—We are two impetuous people; and we have been a little hasty in rushing at a conclusion.’

He stopped. I said nothing. Was the shadow of a doubt of him beginning to rise in my mind? I waited, and listened.

‘I am as fully satisfied as ever of the truth of what Lady Clarinda told you,’ he proceeded. ‘But I see, on consideration, what I failed to see at the time. The story admits of two interpretations. One on the surface, and another under the surface. I look under the surface, in your interests; and I say, it is just possible that Mrs. Beaully may have been cunning enough to forestall suspicion, and to set up an Alibi.’

I am ashamed to own that I did not

understand what he meant by the last word—Alibi. He saw that I was not following him, and spoke out more plainly.

‘Was the maid something more than her mistress’s passive accomplice?’ he said. ‘Was she the Hand that her mistress used? Was she on her way to give the first dose of poison, when she passed me in the corridor? Did Mrs. Beaully spend the night in Edinburgh—so as to have her defence ready, if suspicion fell upon her?’

My shadowy doubt of him became substantial doubt, when I heard that. Had I absolved him a little too readily? Was he really trying to renew my suspicions of Mrs. Beaully, as Mr. Playmore had foretold? This time I was obliged to answer him. In doing so, I unconsciously employed one of the phrases which the lawyer had used to me, during my first interview with him.

‘That sounds rather far-fetched, Mr. Dexter,’ I said.

To my relief, he made no attempt to defend the new view that he had advanced.

‘It *is* far-fetched,’ he admitted. ‘When I said it was just possible—though I didn’t claim much for my idea—I said more for it perhaps than it deserved. Dismiss my view as ridiculous; what are you to do next? If Mrs. Beauly is not the poisoner (either by herself or by her maid), who is? She is innocent, and Eustace is innocent. Where is the other person whom you can suspect? Have *I* poisoned her?’ he cried, with his eyes flashing, and his voice rising to its highest notes. ‘Do you, does anybody, suspect Me? I loved her; I adored her; I have never been the same man since her death. Hush! I will trust you with a secret. (Don’t tell your husband; it might be the destruction of our friendship.) I would have married her, before she met with Eustace, if she would have taken me. When the doctors told me she had died poisoned—ask Doctor Jerome what I suffered! *he* can tell you!

All through that horrible night, I was awake ; watching my opportunity until I found my way to her ! I got into the room, and took my last leave of the cold remains of the angel whom I loved. I cried over her. I kissed her, for the first and last time. I stole one little lock of her hair. I have worn it ever since ; I have kissed it night and day. Oh, God ! the room comes back to me ! the dead face comes back to me ! Look ! look !'

He tore from its place of concealment in his bosom a little locket, fastened by a ribbon round his neck. He threw it to me where I sat ; and burst into a passion of tears.

A man in my place might have known what to do. Being only a woman, I yielded to the compassionate impulse of the moment.

I got up and crossed the room to him. I gave him back his locket, and put my hand, without knowing what I was about, on the poor wretch's shoulder. ' I am incapable of suspecting you, Mr. Dexter,' I said,

gently. 'No such idea ever entered my head. I pity you from the bottom of my heart.'

He caught my hand in his, and devoured it with kisses. His lips burnt me like fire. He twisted himself suddenly in the chair, and wound his arm round my waist. In the terror and indignation of the moment, vainly struggling with him, I cried out for help.

The door opened, and Benjamin appeared on the threshold. Dexter let go his hold of me.

I ran to Benjamin and prevented him from advancing into the room. In all my long experience of my fatherly old friend, I had never seen him really angry yet. I saw him more than angry now. He was pale—the patient, gentle old man was pale with rage! I held him at the door with all my strength.

'You can't lay your hand on a cripple,' I said. 'Send for his servant outside to take him away.'

I drew Benjamin out of the room, and

closed and locked the library door. The housekeeper was in the dining-room. I sent her out to call the driver of the pony-chaise into the house.

The man came in—the rough man whom I had noticed when we were approaching the garden gate. Benjamin opened the library door in stern silence. It was perhaps unworthy of me—but I could *not* resist the temptation to look in.

Miserrimus Dexter had sunk down in the chair. The rough man lifted his master with a gentleness that surprised me. ‘Hide my face,’ I heard Dexter say to him, in broken tones. He opened his coarse pilot jacket, and hid his master’s head under it, and so went silently out—with the deformed creature held to his bosom, like a woman sheltering her child.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ARIEL.

I PASSED a sleepless night.

The outrage that had been offered to me was bad enough in itself. But consequences were associated with it which might affect me more seriously still. In so far as the attainment of the one object of my life might yet depend on my personal association with Miserrimus Dexter, an insurmountable obstacle appeared to be now placed in my way. Even in my husband's interests, ought I to permit a man who had grossly insulted me, to approach me again? Although I was no prude, I recoiled from the thought of it.

I rose late, and sat down at my desk, trying to summon energy enough to write to Mr. Playmore—and trying in vain.

Towards noon (while Benjamin happened to be out for a little while), the housekeeper announced the arrival of another strange visitor at the gate of the villa.

‘It’s a woman this time, ma’am—or something like one,’ said this worthy person, confidentially. ‘A great, stout, awkward, stupid creature, with a man’s hat on, and a man’s stick in her hand. She says she has got a note for you, and she won’t give it to anybody *but* you. I’d better not let her in—had I?’

Recognising the original of the picture, I astonished the housekeeper by consenting to receive the messenger immediately.

Ariel entered the room—in stolid silence, as usual. But I noticed a change in her which puzzled me. Her dull eyes were red and bloodshot. Traces of tears (as I fancied) were visible on her fat, shapeless cheeks. She crossed the room, on her way to my chair, with a less determined tread than was customary with her. Could Ariel (I asked myself) be woman enough

to cry ? Was it within the limits of possibility that Ariel should approach me in sorrow and in fear ?

‘I hear you have brought something for me ?’ I said. ‘Won’t you sit down ?’

She handed me a letter—without answering, and without taking a chair. I opened the envelope. The letter inside was written by Miserrimus Dexter. It contained these lines :—

‘Try to pity me, if you have any pity left for a miserable man ; I have bitterly expiated the madness of a moment. If you could see me—even you would own that my punishment has been heavy enough. For God’s sake, don’t abandon me ! I was beside myself when I let the feeling that you have awakened in me get the better of my control. It shall never show itself again ; it shall be a secret that dies with me. Can I expect you to believe this ? No. I won’t ask you to believe me ; I won’t ask you to trust me in the future. If you ever consent to see me again, let it be in the presence of any third

person whom you may appoint to protect you. I deserve that—I will submit to it ; I will wait till time has composed your angry feeling against me. All I ask now, is leave to hope. Say to Ariel, “ I forgive him ; and one day I will let him see me again.” She will remember it, for love of me. If you send her back without a message, you send me to the madhouse. Ask her, if you don’t believe me.—*MISERRIMUS DEXTER.*’

I finished the strange letter, and looked at Ariel.

She stood with her eyes on the floor, and held out to me the thick walking-stick which she carried in her hand.

‘ Take the stick ’—were the first words she said to me.

‘ Why am I to take it ? ’ I asked.

She struggled a little with her sluggishly-working mind, and slowly put her thoughts into words.

‘ You’re angry with the Master,’ she said. ‘ Take it out on Me. Here’s the stick. Beat me.’

‘ Beat you ! ’ I exclaimed.

‘My back’s broad,’ said the poor creature. ‘I won’t make a row. I’ll bear it. Drat you, take the stick! Don’t vex *him*. Whack it out on my back. Beat *me*.’

She roughly forced the stick into my hand; she turned her poor shapeless shoulders to me, waiting for the blow. It was at once dreadful and touching to see her. The tears rose in my eyes. I tried, gently and patiently, to reason with her. Quite useless! The idea of taking the Master’s punishment on herself was the one idea in her mind. ‘Don’t vex *him*,’ she repeated. ‘Beat *me*.’

‘What do you mean by “vexing him”?’ I asked.

She tried to explain, and failed to find the words. She showed me by imitation, as a savage might have shown me, what she meant. Striding to the fireplace, she crouched on the rug, and looked into the fire with a horrible vacant stare. Then she clasped her hands over her forehead, and rocked slowly to and fro, still staring into the fire. ‘There’s how he sits!’ she said, with a sudden burst of speech. ‘Hours on

hours, there's how he sits! Notices nobody. Cries about *you*.'

The picture she presented recalled to my memory the Report of Dexter's health, and the doctor's plain warning of peril waiting for him in the future. Even if I could have resisted Ariel, I must have yielded to the vague dread of consequences which now shook me in secret.

'Don't do that!' I cried. She was still rocking herself in imitation of the 'Master,' and still staring into the fire with her hands to her head. 'Get up, pray! I am not angry with him now. I forgive him.'

She rose on her hands and knees, and waited, looking up intently into my face. In that attitude—more like a dog than a human being—she repeated her customary petition, when she wanted to fix words that interested her in her mind.

'Say it again!'

I did as she bade me. She was not satisfied.

'Say it as it is in the letter,' she went

on. 'Say it as the Master said it to Me.'

I looked back at the letter, and repeated the form of message contained in the latter part of it, word for word : 'I forgive him ; and one day I will let him see me again.'

She sprang to her feet at a bound. For the first time since she had entered the room, her dull face began to break slowly into light and life.

'That's it !' she cried. 'Hear if I can say it, too ! Hear if I've got it by heart.'

Teaching her, exactly as I should have taught a child, I slowly fastened the message, word by word, on her mind.

'Now rest yourself,' I said ; 'and let me give you something to eat and drink, after your long walk.'

I might as well have spoken to one of the chairs ! She snatched up her stick from the floor, and burst out with a hoarse shout of joy. 'I've got it by heart !' she cried. 'This will cool the Master's head ! Hooray !' She dashed out into the passage, like a wild animal escaping from its

cage. I was just in time to see her tear open the garden gate, and set forth on her walk back, at a pace which made it hopeless to attempt to follow and stop her.

I returned to the sitting-room, pondering on a question which has perplexed wiser heads than mine. Could a man who was hopelessly and entirely wicked, have inspired such devoted attachment to him as Dexter had inspired in the faithful woman who had just left me—in the rough gardener, who had carried him out so gently on the previous night? Who can decide? The greatest scoundrel living always has a friend—in a woman, or a dog.

I sat down again at my desk, and made another attempt to write to Mr. Playmore.

Recalling, for the purpose of my letter, all that Miserrimus Dexter had said to me, my memory dwelt, with special interest, on the strange outbreak of feeling which had led him to betray the secret of

his infatuation for Eustace's first wife. I saw again the ghastly scene in the death-chamber—the deformed creature crying over the corpse, in the stillness of the first dark hours of the new day. The horrible picture took a strange hold on my mind. I rose, and walked up and down, and tried to turn my thoughts some other way. It was not to be done : the scene was too familiar to be easily dismissed. I had myself walked in the corridor which Dexter had crossed, on his way to take his last leave of her.

The corridor ? I stopped. My thoughts suddenly took a new direction, uninfluenced by any effort of my will.

What other association, besides the associations with Dexter, did I connect with the corridor ? Was it something I had seen, during my visit to Gleninch ? No. Was it something I had read ? I snatched up the Report of the Trial to see. It opened at a page which contained the nurse's evidence. I read the evidence through again, without recovering the lost

remembrance, until I came to these lines close at the end :—

‘Before bedtime I went upstairs to prepare the remains of the deceased lady for the coffin. The room in which she lay was locked; the door leading into Mr. Macallan’s room being secured, as well as the door leading into the corridor. The keys had been taken away by Mr. Gale. Two of the men-servants were posted outside the bedroom to keep watch. They were to be relieved at four in the morning—that was all they could tell me.’

There was my lost association with the corridor! There was what I ought to have remembered, when Miserrimus Dexter was telling me of his visit to the dead!

How had he got into the bedroom—the doors being locked, and the keys being taken away by Mr. Gale? There was but one of the locked doors, of which Mr. Gale had not got the key: the door of communication between the study and the bedroom. The key was missing from this. Had it been stolen? And was Dexter the

thief? He might have passed by the men on the watch, while they were asleep; or he might have crossed the corridor, in an unguarded interval while the men were being relieved. But how could he have got into the bedchamber, except by way of the locked study door? He *must* have had the key! And he *must* have secreted it, weeks before Mrs. Eustace Macallan's death! When the nurse first arrived at Gleninch, on the seventh of the month, her evidence declared the key of the door of communication to be then missing.

To what conclusion did these considerations and discoveries point? Had Miserrimus Dexter, in a moment of ungovernable agitation, unconsciously placed the clue in my hands? Was the pivot on which turned the whole mystery of the poisoning at Gleninch, the missing key?

I went back for the third time to my desk. The one person who might be trusted to find the answer to those questions was Mr. Playmore. I wrote him a full and careful account of all that had hap-

pened ; I begged him to forgive and forget my ungracious reception of the advice which he had so kindly offered to me ; and I promised beforehand to do nothing, without first consulting his opinion, in the new emergency which now confronted me.

The day was fine, for the time of year ; and by way of getting a little wholesome exercise, after the surprises and occupations of the morning, I took my letter to Mr. Playmore to the post.

Returning to the villa, I was informed that another visitor was waiting to see me : a civilised visitor this time, who had given her name. My mother-in law—Mrs. Macallan.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AT THE BEDSIDE.

BEFORE she had uttered a word, I saw in my mother-in-law's face that she brought bad news.

‘Eustace?’ I said.

She answered me by a look.

‘Let me hear it at once!’ I cried. ‘I can bear anything but suspense.’

Mrs. Macallan lifted her hand, and showed me a telegraphic despatch which she had hitherto kept concealed in the folds of her dress.

‘I can trust your courage,’ she said
‘There is no need, my child, to prevaricate with you. Read that.’

I read the telegram. It was sent by the chief surgeon of a field-hospital; and it

was dated from a village in the north of Spain.

‘Mr. Eustace severely wounded in a skirmish, by a stray shot. Not in danger, so far. Every care taken of him. Wait for another telegram.’

I turned away my face, and bore as best I might the pang that wrung me when I read those words. I thought I knew how dearly I loved him. I had never known it till that moment.

My mother-in-law put her arm round me, and held me to her tenderly. She knew me well enough not to speak to me at that moment.

I rallied my courage, and pointed to the last sentence in the telegram.

‘Do you mean to wait?’ I asked.

‘Not a day!’ she answered. ‘I am going to the Foreign Office about my passport—I have some interest there: they can give me letters; they can advise and assist me. I leave to-night by the mail train to Calais!’

‘*You* leave?’ I said. ‘Do you suppose I will let you go without me? Get my

passport when you get yours. At seven this evening, I will be at your house.'

She attempted to remonstrate; she spoke of the perils of the journey. At the first words, I stopped her. 'Don't you know yet, mother, how obstinate I am? They may keep you waiting at the Foreign Office. Why do you waste the precious hours here?'

She yielded with a gentleness that was not in her everyday character. 'Will my poor Eustace ever know what a wife he has got!' That was all she said. She kissed me, and went away in her carriage.

My remembrances of our journey are strangely vague and imperfect.

As I try to recall them, the memory of those more recent and more interesting events which occurred after my return to England, gets between me and my adventures in Spain, and seems to force these last into a shadowy background, until they look like adventures that happened many years since. I confusedly recollect delays and

alarms that tried our patience and our courage. I remember our finding friends (thanks to our letters of recommendation) in a Secretary to the Embassy, and in a Queen's Messenger, who assisted and protected us at a critical point in the journey. I recall to mind a long succession of men, in our employment as travellers, all equally remarkable for their dirty cloaks and their clean linen, for their highly-civilised courtesy to women, and their utterly-barbarous cruelty to horses. Last, and most important of all, I see again, more clearly than I can see anything else, the one wretched bedroom of a squalid village-inn, in which we found our poor darling, prostrate between life and death, insensible to everything that passed in the narrow little world that lay round his bedside.

There was nothing romantic or interesting in the accident which had put my husband's life in peril.

He had ventured too near the scene of the conflict (a miserable affair) to rescue a poor lad who lay wounded on the field—

mortally wounded as the event proved. A rifle-bullet had struck him in the body. His brethren of the field-hospital had carried him back to their quarters, at the risk of their lives. He was a great favourite with all of them ; patient, and gentle, and brave ; only wanting a little more judgment to be the most valuable recruit who had joined the brotherhood.

In telling me this, the surgeon kindly and delicately added a word of warning as well.

The fever caused by the wound had brought with it delirium as usual. My poor husband's mind, in so far as his wandering words might interpret it, was filled by the one image of his wife. The medical attendant had heard enough, in the course of his ministrations at the bedside, to satisfy him that any sudden recognition of me by Eustace (if he recovered) might be attended by the most lamentable results. As things were at that sad time, I might take my turn at nursing him, without the slightest chance of his discovering me, perhaps for weeks and weeks to come. But on the day when

he was declared out of danger—if that happy day ever arrived—I must resign my place at his bedside, and must wait to show myself until the surgeon gave me leave.

My mother-in-law and I relieved each other regularly, day and night, in the sick room.

In the hours of his delirium—hours that recurred with a pitiless regularity—my name was always on my poor darling's fevered lips. The ruling idea in him was the one dreadful idea which I had vainly combated at our last interview. In the face of the verdict pronounced at the Trial, it was impossible even for his wife to be really and truly persuaded that he was an innocent man. All the wild pictures which his distempered imagination drew, were equally inspired by that one obstinate conviction. He fancied himself to be still living with me, under those dreaded conditions. Do what he might, I was always recalling to him the terrible ordeal through which he had passed. He acted his part, and he acted mine. He gave me a cup of tea ; and

I said to him, 'We quarrelled yesterday, Eustace. Is it poisoned?' He kissed me, in token of our reconciliation; and I laughed, and said, 'It's morning now, my dear. Shall I die by nine o'clock to-night?' I was ill in bed, and he gave me my medicine. I looked at him with a doubting eye. I said to him, 'You are in love with another woman. Is there anything in the medicine that the doctor doesn't know of?' Such was the horrible drama which now perpetually acted itself in his mind. Hundreds and hundreds of times I heard him repeat it, almost always in the same words. On other occasions, his thoughts wandered away to my desperate project of proving him to be an innocent man. Sometimes, he laughed at it. Sometimes, he mourned over it. Sometimes, he devised cunning schemes for placing unsuspected obstacles in my way. He was especially hard on me when he was inventing his preventive stratagems—he cheerfully instructed the visionary people who assisted him, not to hesitate at offending or distressing me.

‘Never mind if you make her angry ; never mind if you make her cry. It’s all for her good ; it’s all to save the poor fool from dangers she doesn’t dream of. You mustn’t pity her when she says she does it for my sake. See ! she is going to be insulted ; she is going to be deceived ; she is going to disgrace herself without knowing it. Stop her ! stop her !’ It was weak of me I know ; I ought to have kept the plain fact that he was out of his senses always present to my mind. Still, it is true that my hours passed at my husband’s pillow were many of them hours of mortification and misery of which he, poor dear, was the innocent and only cause.

The weeks passed ; and he still hovered between life and death.

I kept no record of the time, and I cannot now recall the exact date on which the first favourable change took place. I only remember that it was towards sunrise on a fine winter morning, when we were relieved at last of our heavy burden of suspense. The surgeon happened to be by the bedside, when his patient woke. The first thing

he did, after looking at Eustace, was to caution me by a sign to be silent, and to keep out of sight. My mother-in-law and I both knew what this meant. With full hearts, we thanked God together for giving us back the husband and the son.

The same evening, being alone, we ventured to speak of the future—for the first time since we had left home.

‘The surgeon tells me,’ said Mrs. Macallan, ‘that Eustace is too weak to be capable of bearing anything in the nature of a surprise, for some days to come. We have time to consider whether he is, or is not, to be told that he owes his life as much to your care as to mine. Can you find it in your heart to leave him, Valeria, now that God’s mercy has restored him to you and to me?’

‘If I only consulted my own heart,’ I answered, ‘I should never leave him again.’

Mrs. Macallan looked at me in grave surprise.

‘What else have you to consult?’ she asked.

‘If we both live,’ I replied, ‘I have to think of the happiness of his life, and the happiness of mine, in the years that are to come. I can bear a great deal, mother, but I cannot endure the misery of his leaving me for the second time.’

‘You wrong him, Valeria—I firmly believe you wrong him—in thinking it possible that he can leave you again!’

‘Dear Mrs. Macallan, have you forgotten what we have both heard him say of me, while we have been sitting by his bedside?’

‘We have heard the ravings of a man in delirium. It is surely hard to hold Eustace responsible for what he said when he was out of his senses?’

‘It is harder still,’ I said, ‘to resist his mother when she is pleading for him. Dearest and best of friends! I don’t hold Eustace responsible for what he said in the fever—but I *do* take warning by it. The wildest words that fell from him were, one and all, the faithful echo of what he said to me in the best days of his health and

his strength. What hope have I that he will recover with an altered mind towards me? Absence has not changed it; suffering has not changed it. In the delirium of fever, and in the full possession of his reason, he has the same dreadful doubt of me. I see but one way of winning him back. I must destroy at its root his motive for leaving me. It is hopeless to persuade him that I believe in his innocence: I must show him that belief is no longer necessary; I must prove to him that his position towards me has become the position of an innocent man.'

'Valeria! Valeria! you are wasting time and words. You have tried the experiment; and you know as well as I do, the thing is not to be done.'

I had no answer to that. I could say no more than I had said already.

'Suppose you go back to Dexter, out of sheer compassion for a mad and miserable wretch who has already insulted you,' proceeded my mother-in-law. 'You can only go back, accompanied by me. or by some

other trustworthy person. You can only stay long enough to humour the creature's wayward fancy, and to keep his crazy brain quiet for a time. That done, all is done—you leave him. Even supposing Dexter to be still capable of helping you, how can you make use of him but by admitting him to terms of confidence and familiarity—by treating him, in short, on the footing of an intimate friend? Answer me honestly: can you bring yourself to do that, after what happened at Mr. Benjamin's house?’

I had told her of my last interview with Miserrimus Dexter, in the natural confidence that she inspired in me as relative and fellow-traveller; and this was the use to which she turned her information! I suppose I had no right to blame her; I suppose the motive sanctioned everything. At any rate, I had no choice but to give offence, or to give an answer. I gave it. I acknowledged that I could never again permit Miserrimus Dexter to treat me on terms of familiarity, as a trusted and intimate friend.

Mrs. Macallan pitilessly pressed the advantage that she had won.

‘Very well,’ she said, ‘that resource being no longer open to you, what hope is left? Which way are you to turn next?’

There was no meeting those questions, in my present situation, by any adequate reply. I felt strangely unlike myself—I submitted in silence. Mrs. Macallan struck the last blow that completed her victory.

‘My poor Eustace is weak and wayward,’ she said; ‘but he is not an ungrateful man. My child! you have returned him good for evil—you have proved how faithfully and how devotedly you love him, by suffering hardships and by risking dangers for his sake. Trust me, and trust him! He cannot resist you. Let him see the dear face that he has been dreaming of, looking at him again with all the old love in it; and he is yours once more, my daughter—yours for life.’ She rose and touched my forehead with her lips; her voice sank to tones of tenderness which I had never heard from her yet. ‘Say yes,

Valeria,' she whispered ; 'and be dearer to me and dearer to him than ever !'

My heart sided with her. My energies were worn out. No letter had arrived from Mr. Playmore, to guide and to encourage me. I had resisted so long and so vainly ; I had tried and suffered so much ; I had met with such cruel disasters and such reiterated disappointments—and *he* was in the room beneath me, feebly finding his way back to consciousness and to life—how could I resist ? It was all over ! In saying Yes (if Eustace confirmed his mother's confidence in him), I was saying adieu to the one cherished ambition, the one dear and noble hope of my life. I knew it—and I said Yes.

And so good-bye to the grand struggle !
And so welcome to the new resignation which owned that I had failed !

My mother-in-law and I slept together under the only shelter that the inn could offer to us—a sort of loft at the top of the house. The night that followed our con-

versation was bitterly cold. We felt the chilly temperature, in spite of the protection of our dressing-gowns and our travelling wrappers. My mother-in-law slept; but no rest came to me. I was too anxious and too wretched, thinking over my changed position and doubting how my husband would receive me, to be able to sleep.

Some hours, as I suppose, must have passed, and I was still absorbed in my own melancholy thoughts—when I suddenly became conscious of a new and strange sensation which astonished and alarmed me. I started up in the bed, breathless and bewildered. The movement awakened Mrs. Macallan. ‘Are you ill?’ she asked. ‘What is the matter with you?’ I tried to tell her, as well as I could. She seemed to understand me before I had done; she took me tenderly in her arms, and pressed me to her bosom. ‘My poor innocent child,’ she said, ‘is it possible you don’t know? Must I really tell you?’ She whispered her next words. Shall I ever

forget the tumult of feelings which the whisper aroused in me—the strange medley of joy and fear, and wonder and relief, and pride and humility, which filled my whole being, and made a new woman of me from that moment? Now, for the first time, I knew it! If God spared me for a few months more, the most enduring and the most sacred of all human joys might be mine—the joy of being a mother.

I don't know how the rest of the night passed. I only found my memory again, when the morning came, and when I went out by myself to breathe the crisp wintry air on the open moor behind the inn.

I have said that I felt like a new woman. The morning found me with a new resolution and a new courage. When I thought of the future, I had not only my husband to consider now. His good name was no longer his own and mine—it might soon become the most precious inheritance that he could leave to his child. What had I done, while I was in ignorance of this? I had resigned the hope of cleansing his

name from the stain that had rested on it—a stain still, no matter how little it might look in the eye of the Law. Our child might live to hear malicious tongues say, ‘Your father was tried for the vilest of all murders, and was never absolutely acquitted of the charge.’ Could I face the glorious perils of childbirth, with that possibility present to my mind? No! not until I had made one more effort to lay the conscience of Miserrimus Dexter bare to my view! not until I had once again renewed the struggle, and brought the truth that vindicated the husband and the father to the light of day!

I went back to the house, with my new courage to sustain me. I opened my heart to my friend and mother, and told her frankly of the change that had come over me, since we had last spoken of Eustace.

She was more than disappointed, she was almost offended with me. The one thing needful had happened, she said. The happiness that was coming to us would form a new tie between my husband

and me. Every other consideration but this, she treated as purely fanciful. If I left Eustace now, I did a heartless thing and a foolish thing. I should regret, to the end of my days, having thrown away the one golden opportunity of my married life.

It cost me a hard struggle, it oppressed me with many a painful doubt ; but I held firm, this time. The honour of the father, the inheritance of the child—I kept those thoughts as constantly as possible before my mind. Sometimes they failed me, and left me nothing better than a poor fool who had some fitful bursts of crying, and was ashamed of herself afterwards. But my native obstinacy (as Mrs. Macallan said) carried me through. Now and then, I had a peep at Eustace, while he was asleep, and that helped me too. Though they made my heart ache and shook me sadly at the time, those furtive visits to my husband fortified me afterwards. I cannot explain how this happened (it seems so contradictory); I can only repeat it as one of my experiences at that troubled time.

I made one concession to Mrs. Macallan—I consented to wait for two days, before I took any steps for returning to England, on the chance that my mind might change in the interval.

It was well for me that I yielded so far. On the second day, the director of the field-hospital sent to the post-office, at our nearest town, for letters addressed to him or to his care. The messenger brought back a letter for me. I thought I recognised the handwriting, and I was right. Mr. Playmore's answer had reached me at last!

If I had been in any danger of changing my mind, the good lawyer would have saved me in the nick of time. The extract that follows contains the pith of his letter; and shows how he encouraged me, when I stood in sore need of a few cheering and friendly words.

‘Let me now tell you (he wrote) ‘what I have done towards verifying the conclusion to which your letter points.

‘I have traced one of the servants who

was appointed to keep watch in the corridor, on the night when the first Mrs. Eustace died at Gleninch. The man perfectly remembers that Miserrimus Dexter appeared before him and his fellow-servant (in his chair), after the house was quiet for the night. Dexter said to them, 'I suppose there is no harm in my going into the study to read? I can't sleep after what has happened; I must relieve my mind somehow.' The men had no orders to keep anyone out of the study. They knew that the door of communication with the bedchamber was locked, and that the keys of the two other doors of communication were in the possession of Mr. Gale. They accordingly permitted Dexter to go into the study. He closed the door (the door that opened on the corridor), and remained absent for some time—in the study as the men supposed; in the bedchamber as *we* know, from what he let out at his interview with you. Now, he could enter that room, as you rightly imagine, in but one way—by being in possession of

the missing key. How long he remained there, I cannot discover. The point is of little consequence. The servant remembers that he came out of the study again 'as pale as death,' and that he passed on without a word, on his way back to his own room.

'These are facts. The conclusion to which they lead is serious in the last degree. It justifies everything that I confided to you in my office at Edinburgh. You remember what passed between us. I say no more.

'As to yourself next. You have innocently aroused in Miserrimus Dexter a feeling towards you, which I need not attempt to characterise. There is a certain something—I saw it myself—in your figure, and in some of your movements, which does recall the late Mrs. Eustace to those who knew her well, and which has evidently had its effect on Dexter's morbid mind. Without dwelling further on this subject, let me only remind you that he has shown himself (as a consequence of your influence

over him) to be incapable, in his moments of agitation, of thinking before he speaks, while he is in your presence. It is not merely possible, it is highly probable, that he may betray himself far more seriously than he has betrayed himself yet, if you give him the opportunity. I owe it to you (knowing what your interests are) to express myself plainly on this point. I have no sort of doubt that you have advanced one step nearer to the end which you have in view, in the brief interval since you left Edinburgh. I see in your letter (and in my discoveries) irresistible evidence that Dexter must have been in secret communication with the deceased lady (innocent communication, I am certain, so far as *she* was concerned), not only at the time of her death, but probably for weeks before it. I cannot disguise from myself, or from you, my own strong persuasion that, if you succeed in discovering the nature of this communication, in all human likelihood you prove your husband's innocence by the discovery of the truth. As

an honest man, I am bound not to conceal this. And, as an honest man also, I am equally bound to add that, not even with your reward in view, can I find it in my conscience to advise you to risk what you must risk, if you see Miserrimus Dexter again. In this difficult and delicate matter, I cannot, and will not, take the responsibility. The final decision must rest with yourself. One favour only I entreat you to grant—let me hear what you resolve to do as soon as you know it yourself.’

The difficulties which my worthy correspondent felt were no difficulties to me. I did not possess Mr. Playmore’s judicial mind. My resolution (come what might of it) to see Miserrimus Dexter again, was settled before I had read his letter to the end.

The mail to France crossed the frontier the next day. There was a place for me under the protection of the conductor, if I chose to take it. Without consulting a living creature—rash as usual, headlong as usual—I took it.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ON THE JOURNEY BACK.

IF I had been travelling homeward in my own carriage, the remaining chapters of this narrative would never have been written. Before we had been an hour on the road, I should have called to the driver, and should have told him to turn back.

Who can be always resolute?

In asking that question, I speak of the women, not of the men. I had been resolute in turning a deaf ear to Mr. Playmore's doubts and cautions; resolute in holding out against my mother-in-law; resolute in taking my place by the French mail. Until ten minutes after we had driven away from the inn my courage held out—and then it failed me; then I said to myself, 'You

wretch, you have deserted your husband !' For hours afterwards, if I could have stopped the mail, I would have done it. I hated the conductor, the kindest of men. I hated the Spanish ponies that drew us, the cheeriest animals that ever jingled a string of bells. I hated the bright day that *would* make things pleasant, and the bracing air that forced me to feel the luxury of breathing, whether I liked it or not. Never was a journey more miserable than my safe and easy journey to the frontier ! But one little comfort helped me to bear my heart-ache resignedly—a stolen morsel of Eustace's hair. We had started at an hour of the morning, when he was still sound asleep. I could creep into his room, and kiss him, and cry over him softly, and cut off a stray lock of his hair, without danger of discovery. How I summoned resolution enough to leave him is, to this hour, not clear to my mind. I think my mother-in-law must have helped me, without meaning to do it. She came into the room with an erect head, and a cold eye ;

she said, with an unmerciful emphasis on the word, 'If you *mean* to go, Valeria, the carriage is here.' Any woman with a spark of spirit in her would have 'meant' it under those circumstances. I meant it—and did it.

And then I was sorry for it. Poor humanity!

Time has got all the credit of being the great consoler of afflicted mortals. In my opinion, Time has been over-rated in this matter. Distance does the same beneficent work, far more speedily, and (when assisted by Change) far more effectually as well. On the railroad to Paris, I became capable of taking a sensible view of my position. I could now remind myself that my husband's reception of me—after the first surprise and the first happiness had passed away—might not have justified his mother's confidence in him. Admitting that I ran a risk in going back to Miserrimus Dexter, should I not have been equally rash, in another way, if I had returned, uninvited, to a husband who had declared that our conjugal happiness

was impossible, and that our married life was at an end ? Besides, who could say that the events of the future might not yet justify me—not only to myself, but to him ? I might yet hear him say, ‘ She was inquisitive when she had no business to enquire ; she was obstinate when she ought to have listened to reason ; she left my bedside when other women would have remained : but in the end she atoned for it all—she turned out to be right ! ’

I rested a day at Paris, and wrote three letters.

One to Benjamin, telling him to expect me the next evening. One to Mr. Playmore, warning him, in good time, that I meant to make a last effort to penetrate the mystery at Gleninch. One to Eustace (of a few lines only), owning that I had helped to nurse him through the dangerous part of his illness ; confessing the one reason which had prevailed with me to leave him ; and entreating him to suspend his opinion of me, until time had proved that I loved him more dearly than ever. This last letter I

enclosed to my mother-in-law ; leaving it to her discretion to choose the right time for giving it to her son. I positively forbade Mrs. Macallan, however, to tell Eustace of the new tie between us. Although he *had* separated himself from me, I was determined that he should not hear of it from other lips than mine. Never mind why ! There are certain little matters which I must keep to myself ; and this is one of them.

My letters being written, my duty was done. I was free to play my last card in the game—the darkly-doubtful game which was neither quite for me, nor quite against me, as the chances now stood.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

ON THE WAY TO DEXTER.

‘I DECLARE to Heaven, Valeria, I believe that monster’s madness is infectious—and you have caught it!’

This was Benjamin’s opinion of me (on my arrival at the villa); after I had announced my intention of returning Miserri-mus Dexter’s visit, in his company.

Being determined to carry my point, I could afford to try the influence of mild persuasion. I begged my good friend to have a little patience with me. ‘And do remember what I have already told you,’ I added. ‘It is of serious importance to me to see Dexter again.’

I only heaped fuel on the fire. ‘See him again?’ Benjamin repeated, indignantly.

‘See him, after he grossly insulted you, under my roof, in this very room? I can’t be awake; I must be asleep and dreaming.’

It was wrong of me, I know. But Benjamin’s virtuous indignation was so very virtuous that it let the spirit of mischief loose in me. I really could not resist the temptation to outrage his sense of propriety, by taking an audaciously liberal view of the whole matter.

‘Gently, my good friend, gently!’ I said. ‘We must make allowances for a man who suffers under Dexter’s infirmities, and lives Dexter’s life. And really we must not let our modesty lead us beyond reasonable limits. I begin to think that I took rather a prudish view of the thing myself, at the time. A woman who respects herself, and whose whole heart is with her husband, is not so very seriously injured when a wretched crippled creature is rude enough to put his arm round her waist. Virtuous indignation (if I may venture to say so) is sometimes very cheap indignation. Besides, I have forgiven him—and

you must forgive him, too. There is no fear of his forgetting himself again, while you are with me. His house is quite a curiosity; it is sure to interest you; the pictures alone are worth the journey. I will write to him to-day, and we will go and see him together to-morrow. We owe it to ourselves (if we don't owe it to Mr. Dexter) to pay this visit. If you will look about you, Benjamin, you will see that benevolence towards everybody is the great virtue of the time we live in. Poor Mr. Dexter must have the benefit of the prevailing fashion. Come, come, march with the age! Open your mind to the new ideas!

Instead of accepting this polite invitation, worthy old Benjamin flew at the age we lived in, like a bull at a red cloth.

'Oh, the new ideas! the new ideas! By all manner of means, Valeria, let us have the new ideas! The old morality's all wrong, the old ways are all worn out. Let's march with the age we live in. Nothing comes amiss to the age we live in.

The wife in England and the husband in Spain, married or not married, living together or not living together—it's all one to the new ideas. I'll go with you, Valeria ; I'll be worthy of the generation I live in. When we have done with Dexter, don't let's do things by halves. Let's go and get crammed with ready-made science at a lecture—let's hear the last new professor, the man who has been behind the scenes at Creation, and knows to a T how the world was made, and how long it took to make it. There's the other fellow, too : mind we don't forget the modern Solomon who has left his proverbs behind him—the bran-new philosopher who considers the consolations of religion in the light of harmless playthings, and who is kind enough to say that he might have been all the happier if he could only have been childish enough to play with them himself. Oh, the new ideas, the new ideas, what consoling, elevating, beautiful discoveries have been made by the new ideas ! We were all monkeys before we were men,

and molecules before we were monkeys ! And what does it matter ? And what does anything matter to anybody ? I'm with you, Valeria—I'm ready ! The sooner the better. Come to Dexter ! Come to Dexter !'

'I am so glad you agree with me,' I said. 'But let us do nothing in a hurry. Three o'clock to-morrow will be time enough for Mr. Dexter. I will write at once and tell him to expect us.—Where are you going ?'

'I am going to clear my mind of cant,' said Benjamin, sternly. 'I am going into the library.'

'What are you going to read ?'

'I am going to read——'Puss in Boots,' and 'Jack and the Bean-Stalk,' and anything else I can find that doesn't march with the age we live in.'

With that parting shot at the new ideas, my old friend left me for a time.

Having despatched my note, I found myself beginning to revert, with a certain feeling of anxiety, to the subject of Miser-

rimus Dexter's health. How had he passed through the interval of my absence from England? Could anybody, within my reach, tell me news of him? To enquire of Benjamin would only be to provoke a new outbreak. While I was still considering, the housekeeper entered the room on some domestic errand. I asked, at a venture, if she had heard anything more, while I had been away, of the extraordinary person who had so seriously alarmed her on a former occasion.

The housekeeper shook her head, and looked as if she thought it in bad taste to mention the subject at all.

‘About a week after you had gone away, ma’am,’ she said, with extreme severity of manner, and with excessive carefulness in her choice of words, ‘the Person you mention had the impudence to send a letter to you. The messenger was informed, by my master’s orders, that you had gone abroad, and he and his letter were both sent about their business together. Not long afterwards, ma’am, I

happened, while drinking tea with Mrs. Macallan's housekeeper, to hear of the Person again. He himself called in his chaise, at Mrs. Macallan's, to enquire about you there. How he can contrive to sit, without legs to balance him, is beyond my understanding—but that is neither here nor there. Legs or no legs, the housekeeper saw him, and she says, as I say, she will never forget him to her dying day. She told him (as soon as she recovered herself) of Mr. Eustace's illness, and of you and Mrs. Macallan being in foreign parts nursing him. He went away, so the housekeeper told me, with tears in his eyes, and oaths and curses on his lips—a sight shocking to see. That's all I know about the Person, ma'am, and I hope to be excused if I venture to say that the subject is (for good reasons) extremely disagreeable to me.'

She made a formal curtsey, and quitted the room.

Left by myself, I felt more anxious and more uncertain than ever, when I thought

of the experiment that was to be tried on the next day. Making due allowance for exaggeration, the description of Miserrimus Dexter, on his departure from Mrs. Macallan's house, suggested that he had not endured my long absence very patiently, and that he was still as far as ever from giving his shattered nervous system its fair chance of repose.

The next morning brought me Mr. Playmore's reply to the letter which I had addressed to him from Paris.

He wrote very briefly, neither approving nor blaming my decision, but strongly reiterating his opinion that I should do well to choose a competent witness as my companion at my coming interview with Dexter. The most interesting part of the letter was at the end. 'You must be prepared,' Mr. Playmore wrote, 'to see a change for the worse in Dexter. A friend of mine was with him on a matter of business a few days since, and was struck by the alteration in him. Your presence is sure to have its effect one way or another. I can give you no in-

structions for managing him—you must be guided by the circumstances. Your own tact will tell you whether it is wise, or not, to encourage him to speak of the late Mrs. Eustace. The chances of his betraying himself all revolve (as I think) round that one topic : keep him to it if you can.' To this was added, in a postscript : ' Ask Mr. Benjamin if he was near enough to the library door to hear Dexter tell you of his entering the bedchamber, on the night of Mrs. Eustace Macallan's death.'

I put the question to Benjamin when we met at the luncheon-table, before setting forth for the distant suburb in which Miserrimus Dexter lived. My old friend disapproved of the contemplated expedition as strongly as ever. He was unusually grave and unusually sparing of words, when he answered me.

' I am no listener,' he said. ' But some people have voices which insist on being heard. Mr. Dexter is one of them.'

' Does that mean that you heard him ?' I asked.

‘The door couldn’t muffle him, and the wall couldn’t muffle him,’ Benjamin rejoined. ‘I heard him—and I thought it infamous. There!’

‘I may want you to do more than hear him, this time,’ I ventured to say. ‘I may want you to make notes of our conversation, while Mr. Dexter is speaking to me. You used to write down what my father said, when he was dictating his letters to you. Have you got one of your little note-books to spare?’

Benjamin looked up from his plate with an aspect of stern surprise.

‘It is one thing,’ he said, ‘to write under the dictation of a great merchant, conducting a vast correspondence by which thousands of pounds change hands in due course of post. And it’s another thing to take down the gibberish of a maundering mad monster who ought to be kept in a cage. Your good father, Valeria, would never have asked me to do that.’

‘Forgive me, Benjamin : I must really ask you to do it. It is Mr. Playmore’s

idea, mind!—not mine. Come! give way this once, dear, for my sake.'

Benjamin looked down again at his plate, with a rueful resignation which told me that I had carried my point.

'I have been tied to her apron-string all my life,' I heard him grumble to himself. 'And it's too late in the day to get loose from her now.' He looked up again at me. 'I thought I had retired from business,' he said. 'But it seems I must turn clerk again. Well? What is the new stroke of work that's expected from me, this time?'

The cab was announced to be waiting for us at the gate, as he asked the question. I rose and took his arm, and gave him a grateful kiss on his rosy old cheek.

'Only two things,' I said. 'Sit down behind Mr. Dexter's chair, so that he can't see you. But take care to place yourself, at the same time, so that you can see me.'

'The less I see of Mr. Dexter, the better I shall be pleased,' growled Ben-

jamin. 'What am I to do, after I have taken my place behind him?'

'You are to wait until I make you a sign; and when you see it you are to begin writing down in your note-book what Mr. Dexter is saying—and you are to go on, until I make another sign which means, Leave off!'

'Well?' said Benjamin, 'What's the sign for, Begin? and what's the sign for, Leave off?'

I was not quite prepared with an answer to this. I asked him to help me with a hint. No! Benjamin would take no active part in the matter. He was resigned to be employed in the capacity of passive instrument—and there all concession ended, so far as he was concerned.

Left to my own resources, I found it no easy matter to invent a telegraphic system which should sufficiently inform Benjamin, without awakening Dexter's quick suspicion. I looked into the glass to see if I could find the necessary suggestion in anything that I wore. My ear-

rings supplied me with the idea of which I was in search.

‘ I shall take care to sit in an arm-chair,’ I said. ‘ When you see me rest my elbow on the chair, and lift my hand to my ear-ring, as if I was playing with it—write down what he says ; and go on until—well, suppose we say, until you hear me move my chair. At that sound, stop. You understand me ?’

‘ I understand you.’

We started for Dexter’s house.

CHAPTER XL.

NEMESIS AT LAST!

THE gardener opened the gate to us on this occasion. He had evidently received his orders, in anticipation of my arrival.

‘Mrs Valeria?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’

‘And friend?’

‘And friend.’

‘Please to step upstairs. You know the house.’

Crossing the hall, I stopped for a moment, and looked at a favourite walking-cane which Benjamin still kept in his hand.

‘Your cane will only be in your way,’ I said. ‘Had you not better leave it here?’

‘My cane may be useful upstairs,’ re-

torted Benjamin, gruffly. ‘*I* haven’t forgotten what happened in the library.’

It was no time to contend with him. I led the way up the stairs.

Arriving at the upper flight of steps, I was startled by hearing a sudden cry from the room above. It was like the cry of a person in pain ; and it was twice repeated, before we entered the circular ante-chamber. I was the first to approach the inner room, and to see the many-sided Miserrimus Dexter in another new aspect of his character.

The unfortunate Ariel was standing before a table, with a dish of little cakes placed in front of her. Round each of her wrists was tied a string, the free end of which (at a distance of a few yards) was held in Miserrimus Dexter’s hands. ‘Try again, my beauty!’ I heard him say, as I stopped on the threshold of the door. ‘Take a cake.’ At the word of command, Ariel submissively stretched out one arm towards the dish. Just as she touched a cake with the tips of her fingers, her hand

was jerked away by a pull at the string, so savagely cruel in the nimble and devilish violence of it, that I felt inclined to snatch Benjamin's cane out of his hand, and break it over Miserrimus Dexter's back. Ariel suffered the pain this time in Spartan silence. The position in which she stood enabled her to be the first to see me at the door. She had discovered me. Her teeth were set; her face was flushed under the struggle to restrain herself. Not even a sigh escaped her in my presence.

'Drop the strings!' I called out, indignantly. 'Release her, Mr. Dexter, or I shall leave the house.'

At the sound of my voice he burst out with a shrill cry of welcome. His eyes fastened on me with a fierce, devouring delight.

'Come in! come in!' he cried. 'See what I am reduced to, in the maddening suspense of waiting for you. See how I kill the time when the time parts us. Come in! come in! I am in one of my malicious humours this morning, caused

entirely, Mrs. Valeria, by my anxiety to see you. When I am in my malicious humours I must tease something. I am teasing Ariel. Look at her! She has had nothing to eat all day, and she hasn't been quick enough to snatch a morsel of cake yet. You needn't pity her. Ariel has no nerves—I don't hurt her.'

'Ariel has no nerves,' echoed the poor creature, frowning at me for interfering between her master and herself. 'He doesn't hurt me.'

I heard Benjamin beginning to swing his cane behind me.

'Drop the strings!' I reiterated, more vehemently than ever. 'Drop them—or I shall instantly leave you.'

Miserrimus Dexter's delicate nerves shuddered at my violence. 'What a glorious voice!' he exclaimed—and dropped the strings. 'Take the cakes,' he added, addressing Ariel in his most imperial manner.

She passed me, with the strings hanging from her swollen wrists, and the dish

of cakes in her hand. She nodded her head at me defiantly.

‘Ariel has got no nerves,’ she repeated, proudly. ‘He doesn’t hurt me.’

‘You see,’ said Miserrimus Dexter, ‘there is no harm done—and I dropped the strings when you told me. Don’t *begin* by being hard on me, Mrs. Valeria, after your long, long absence.’ He paused. Benjamin, standing silent in the doorway, attracted his attention for the first time. ‘Who is this?’ he asked; and wheeled his chair suspiciously nearer to the door. ‘I know!’ he cried, before I could answer. ‘This is the benevolent gentleman who looked like the refuge of the afflicted, when I saw him last. You have altered for the worse since then, Sir. You have stepped into quite a new character—you personify Retributive Justice, now. Your new protector, Mrs. Valeria—I understand!’ He bowed low to Benjamin, with ferocious irony. ‘Your humble servant, Mr. Retributive Justice! I have deserved

you—and I submit to you. Walk in, Sir! I will take care that your new office shall be a sinecure. This lady is the Light of my Life. Catch me failing in respect towards her, if you can!’ He backed his chair before Benjamin (who listened to him in contemptuous silence) until he reached the part of the room in which I was standing. ‘Your hand, Light of my Life!’ he murmured, in his gentlest tones. ‘Your hand—only to show you have forgiven me!’ I gave him my hand. ‘One?’ he whispered, entreatingly. ‘Only one?’ He kissed my hand once, respectfully—and dropped it with a heavy sigh. ‘Ah, poor Dexter!’ he said, pitying himself with the whole sincerity of his egotism. ‘A warm heart, wasted in solitude, mocked by deformity. Sad! sad! Ah, poor Dexter!’ He looked round again at Benjamin, with another flash of his ferocious irony. ‘A beautiful day, Sir,’ he said, with mock-conventional courtesy. ‘Seasonable weather indeed after the late long-continued rains. Can I offer

you any refreshment ? Won't you sit down ? Retributive Justice, when it is no taller than you are, looks best in a chair.'

'And a monkey looks best in a cage,' rejoined Benjamin, enraged at the satirical reference to his shortness of stature. 'I was waiting, Sir, to see you get into your swing.'

The retort produced no effect on Miserimus Dexter : it appeared to have passed by him unheard. He had changed again ; he was thoughtful, he was subdued ; his eyes were fixed on me with a sad and rapt attention. I took the nearest arm-chair ; first casting a glance at Benjamin, which he immediately understood. He placed himself behind Dexter, at an angle which commanded a view of my chair. Ariel, silently devouring her cakes, crouched on a stool at 'the Master's' feet, and looked up at him like a faithful dog. There was an interval of quiet and repose. I was able to observe Miserrimus Dexter uninterruptedly, for the first time since I had entered the room.

I was not surprised—I was nothing less than alarmed by the change for the worse in him, since we had last met. Mr. Playmore's letter had not prepared me for the serious deterioration in him which I could now discern.

His features were pinched and worn ; the whole face seemed to have wasted strangely in substance and size, since I had last seen it. The softness in his eyes was gone. Blood-red veins were intertwined all over them now ; they were set in a piteous and vacant stare. His once firm hands looked withered ; they trembled as they lay on the coverlid. The paleness of his face (exaggerated, perhaps, by the black velvet jacket that he wore) had a sodden and sickly look—the fine outline was gone. The multitudinous little wrinkles at the corners of his eyes had deepened. His head sank into his shoulders when he leaned forward in his chair. Years appeared to have passed over him, instead of months, while I had been absent from England. Remembering the medical report which

Mr. Playmore had given me to read—recalling the doctor's positively-declared opinion that the preservation of Dexter's sanity depended on the healthy condition of his nerves—I could not but feel that I had done wisely (if I might still hope for success) in hastening my return from Spain. Knowing what I knew, fearing what I feared, I believed that his time was near. I felt, when our eyes met by accident, that I was looking at a doomed man.

I pitied him.

Yes! yes! I know that compassion for him was utterly inconsistent with the motive which had taken me to his house—utterly inconsistent with the doubt, still present to my mind, whether Mr. Playmore had really wronged him in believing that his was the guilt which had compassed the first Mrs. Eustace's death. I felt this: I knew him to be cruel; I believed him to be false. And yet, I pitied him! Is there a common fund of wickedness in us all? Is the suppression or the development of

that wickedness a mere question of training and temptation? And is there something in our deeper sympathies which mutely acknowledges this, when we feel for the wicked; when we crowd to a criminal trial; when we shake hands at parting (if we happen to be present officially) with the vilest monster that ever swung on a gallows? It is not for me to decide. I can only say that I pitied Miserrimus Dexter—and that he found it out.

‘Thank you,’ he said, suddenly. ‘You see I am ill, and you feel for me. Dear and good Valeria!’

‘This lady’s name, Sir, is Mrs. Eustace Macallan,’ interposed Benjamin, speaking sternly behind him. ‘The next time you address her, remember, if you please, that you have no business with her Christian name.’

Benjamin’s rebuke passed, like Benjamin’s retort, unheeded and unheard. To all appearance, Miserrimus Dexter had completely forgotten that there was such a person in the room.

‘ You have delighted me with the sight of you,’ he went on. ‘ Add to the pleasure by letting me hear your voice. Talk to me of yourself. Tell me what you have been doing since you left England.’

It was necessary to my object to set the conversation afloat ; and this was as good a way of doing it as any other. I told him plainly how I had been employed during my absence.

‘ So you are still fond of Eustace ? ’ he said, bitterly.

‘ I love him more dearly than ever.’

He lifted his hands, and hid his face. After waiting awhile, he went on ; speaking in an odd, muffled manner, still under cover of his hands.

‘ And you leave Eustace in Spain ? ’ he said ; ‘ and you return to England by yourself ! What made you do that ? ’

‘ What made me first come here, and ask you to help me, Mr. Dexter ? ’

He dropped his hands, and looked at me. I saw in his eyes, not amazement only, but alarm.

‘Is it possible,’ he exclaimed, ‘that you won’t let that miserable matter rest even yet? Are you still determined to meddle with the mystery at Gleninch?’

‘I am still determined, Mr. Dexter; and I still hope that you may be able to help me.’

The old distrust that I remembered so well, darkened again over his face the moment I said those words.

‘How can I help you?’ he asked. ‘Can I alter facts?’ He stopped. His face brightened again, as if some sudden sense of relief had come to him. ‘I *did* try to help you,’ he went on. ‘I told you that Mrs. Beaully’s absence was a device to screen herself from suspicion; I told you that the poison might have been given by Mrs. Beaully’s maid. Has reflection convinced you? Do you see something in the idea?’

This return to Mrs. Beaully gave me my first chance of leading the talk to the right topic.

‘I see nothing in the idea,’ I answered.

‘I see no motive. Had the maid any reason to be an enemy to the late Mrs. Eustace?’

‘Nobody had any reason to be an enemy to the late Mrs. Eustace!’ he broke out, loudly and vehemently. ‘She was all goodness, all kindness; she never injured any human creature in thought or deed. She was a saint upon earth. Respect her memory! Let the martyr rest in her grave!’ He covered his face again with his hands, and shook and shuddered under the paroxysm of emotion that I had roused in him.

Ariel suddenly and softly left her stool, and approached me.

‘Do you see my ten claws?’ she whispered, holding out her hands. ‘Vex the Master again—and you will feel my ten claws on your throat!’

Benjamin rose from his seat: he had seen the action, without hearing the words. I signed to him to keep his place. Ariel returned to her stool, and looked up again at the Master.

‘Don’t cry,’ she said. ‘Come on.

Here are the strings. Tease me again. Make me screech with the smart of it.'

He never answered, and never moved.

Ariel bent her slow mind to meet the difficulty of attracting his attention. I saw it in her frowning brows, in her colourless eyes looking at me vacantly. On a sudden, she joyfully struck the open palm of one of her hands with the fist of the other. She had triumphed. She had got an idea.

'Master!' she cried. 'Master! You haven't told me a story for ever so long. Puzzle my thick head. Make my flesh creep. Come on. A good long story. All blood and crimes.'

Had she accidentally hit on the right suggestion to strike his wayward fancy? I knew his high opinion of his own skill in 'dramatic narrative.' I knew that one of his favourite amusements was to puzzle Ariel by telling her stories that she could not understand. Would he wander away into the region of wild romance? Or would he remember that my obstinacy still threatened him with

re-opening the enquiry into the tragedy at Gleninch? and would he set his cunning at work to mislead me by some new stratagem? This latter course was the course which my past experience of him suggested that he would take. But, to my surprise and alarm, I found my past experience at fault. Ariel succeeded in diverting his mind from the subject which had been in full possession of it the moment before she spoke! He showed his face again. It was overspread by a broad smile of gratified self-esteem. He was weak enough now to let even Ariel find her way to his vanity! I saw it, with a sense of misgiving, with a doubt whether I had not delayed my visit until too late, which turned me cold, from head to foot.

Miserrimus Dexter spoke—to Ariel, not to me.

‘Poor devil!’ he said, patting her head complacently. ‘You don’t understand a word of my stories, do you? And yet I can make the flesh creep on your great clumsy body—and yet I can stir your

stagnant mind, and make you like it! Poor devil!’ He leaned back serenely in his chair, and looked my way again. Would the sight of me remind him of the words that had passed between us, not a minute since? No! There was the pleasantly-tickled self-conceit smiling at me exactly as it had smiled at Ariel. ‘I excel in dramatic narrative, Mrs. Valeria,’ he said. ‘And this creature here on the stool, is a remarkable proof of it. She is quite a psychological study, when I tell her one of my stories. It is really amusing to see the half-witted wretch’s desperate efforts to understand me. You shall have a specimen. I have been out of spirits, while you were away—I haven’t told her a story for weeks past; I will tell her one now. Don’t suppose it’s any effort to me! My invention is inexhaustible. You are sure to be amused—you are naturally serious—but you are sure to be amused. I am naturally serious, too: and I always laugh at her.’

Ariel clapped her great shapeless hands. 'He always laughs at me!' she said, with a proud look of superiority, directed straight at Me.

I was at a loss, seriously at a loss, what to do. The outbreak which I had provoked in leading him to speak of the late Mrs. Eustace warned me to be careful, and to wait for my opportunity, before I reverted to *that* subject. How else could I turn the conversation, so as to lead him, little by little, towards the betrayal of the secrets which he was keeping from me? In this uncertainty, one thing only seemed to be plain. To let him tell his story, would be simply to let him waste the precious minutes. With a vivid remembrance of Ariel's 'ten claws,' I decided nevertheless on discouraging Dexter's new whim, at every opportunity and by every means in my power.

'Now, Mrs. Valeria!' he began, loudly and loftily. 'Listen. Now, Ariel! Bring your brains to a focus. I improvise poetry; I improvise fiction. We will begin

with the good old formula of the fairy stories. Once upon a time——'

I was waiting for my opportunity to interrupt him, when he interrupted himself. He stopped, with a bewildered look. He put his hand to his head, and passed it backwards and forwards over his forehead. He laughed feebly.

'I seem to want rousing,' he said.

Was his mind gone? There had been no signs of it, until I had unhappily stirred his memory of the dead mistress of Gleninch. Was the weakness which I had already noticed, was the bewilderment which I now saw, attributable to the influence of a passing disturbance only? In other words, had I witnessed nothing more serious than a first warning to him, and to us? Would he soon recover himself, if we were patient, and gave him time? Even Benjamin was interested at last; I saw him trying to look at Dexter round the corner of the chair. Even Ariel was surprised and uneasy. She had no dark glances to cast at me now.

We all waited to see what he would do, to hear what he would say, next.

‘My harp!’ he cried. ‘Music will rouse me.’

Ariel brought him his harp.

‘Master!’ she said, wonderingly. ‘What’s come to you?’ He waved his hand, commanding her to be silent.

‘Ode to Invention,’ he announced loftily, addressing himself to me. ‘Poetry and music improvised by Dexter. Silence! Attention!’

His fingers wandered feebly over the harp-strings; awakening no melody, suggesting no words. In a little while, his hand dropped; his head sank forward gently, and rested on the frame of the harp. I started to my feet and approached him. Was it a sleep? or was it a swoon?

I touched his arm, and called to him by his name.

Ariel instantly stepped between us, with a threatening look at me. At the same moment, Miserrimus Dexter raised his head. My voice had reached him. He

looked at me with a curious, contemplative quietness in his eyes, which I had never seen in them before.

‘Take away the harp,’ he said to Ariel, speaking in languid tones, like a man who was very weary.

The mischievous half-witted creature—in sheer stupidity, or in downright malice towards me, I am not sure which—irritated him once more.

‘Why, Master?’ she asked, staring at him with the harp hugged in her arms. ‘What has come to you? Where is the story?’

‘We don’t want the story,’ I interposed. ‘I have many things to say to Mr. Dexter which I have not said yet.’

Ariel lifted her heavy hand. ‘You *will* have it!’ she said, and advanced towards me. At the same moment the Master’s voice stopped her.

‘Put away the harp, you fool!’ he repeated, sternly. ‘And wait for the story until I choose to tell it.’

She took the harp submissively back to its place at the end of the room. Miserrimus Dexter moved his chair a little closer to mine. 'I know what will rouse me,' he said, confidentially. 'Exercise will do it. I have had no exercise lately. Wait a little, and you will see.'

He put his hands on the machinery of the chair, and started on his customary course down the room. Here again, the ominous change in him showed itself under a new form. The pace at which he travelled was not the furious pace that I remembered; the chair no longer rushed under him on rumbling and whistling wheels. It went, but it went slowly. Up the room, and down the room, he painfully urged it—and then he stopped, for want of breath.

We followed him. Ariel was first, and Benjamin was by my side. He motioned impatiently to both of them to stand back, and to let me approach him alone.

'I'm out of practice,' he said, faintly. 'I hadn't the heart to make the wheels roar,

and the floor tremble, while you were away.'

Who would not have pitied him? Who would have remembered his misdeeds at that moment? Even Ariel felt it. I heard her beginning to whine and whimper behind me. The magician who alone could rouse the dormant sensibilities in her nature had awakened them now by his neglect. Her fatal cry was heard again, in mournful, moaning tones.

'What's come to you, Master? Have you forgot me? Where's the story?'

'Never mind her,' I whispered to him. 'You want the fresh air. Send for the gardener. Let us take a drive in your pony-chaise.'

It was useless. Ariel would be noticed. The mournful cry came once more.

'Where's the story? Where's the story?'

The sinking spirit leapt up in Dexter again.

'You wretch! you fiend!' he cried, whirling his chair round, and facing her. 'The story is coming. I *can* tell it! I *will*

tell it ! Wine ! You whimpering idiot, get me the wine. Why didn't I think of it before ? The kingly Burgundy ! that's what I want, Valeria, to set my invention alight and flaming in my head. Glasses for everybody ! Honour to the King of the Vintages—the Royal Clos Vougeot !'

Ariel opened the cupboard in the alcove, and produced the wine and the high Venetian glasses. Dexter drained his goblet full of Burgundy at a draught ; he forced us to drink (or at least pretend to drink) with him. Even Ariel had her share, this time, and emptied her glass in rivalry with her master. The powerful wine mounted almost instantly to her weak head. She began to sing hoarsely a song of her own devising, in imitation of Dexter. It was nothing but the repetition, the endless mechanical repetition, of her demand for the story. ' Tell us the story. Master ! master ! tell us the story ! ' Absorbed over his wine, the Master silently filled his goblet for the second time. Benjamin whispered to me, while his eye was off us,

‘Take my advice, Valeria, for once; let us go.’

‘One last effort,’ I whispered back.
‘Only one!’

Ariel went drowsily on with her song.

‘Tell us the story. Master! master! tell us the story.’

Miserrimus Dexter looked up from his glass. The generous stimulant was beginning to do its work. I saw the colour rising in his face. I saw the bright intelligence flashing again in his eyes. The Burgundy *had* roused him! The good wine offered me a last chance!

‘Now for the story!’ he cried.

‘No story!’ I said. ‘I want to talk to you, Mr. Dexter. I am not in the humour for a story.’

‘Not in the humour?’ he repeated, with a gleam of the old impish irony showing itself again in his face. ‘That’s an excuse. I see what it is! You think my invention is gone—and you are not frank enough to confess it. I’ll show you you’re wrong. I’ll show you that Dexter

is himself again. Silence, you Ariel, or you shall leave the room! I have got it, Mrs. Valeria, all laid out here, with scenes and characters complete.' He touched his forehead, and looked at me with a furtive and smiling cunning, before he added his next words. 'It's the very thing to interest *you*, my fair friend. It's the story of a Mistress and a Maid. Come back to the fire and hear it.'

The Story of a Mistress and a Maid? If that meant anything, it meant the story of Mrs. Beauly and her maid, told in disguise!

The title, and the look which had escaped him when he announced it, revived the hope that was well-nigh dead in me. He had rallied at last. He was again in possession of his natural foresight and his natural cunning. Under pretence of telling Ariel her story, he was evidently about to make the attempt to mislead me, for the second time. The conclusion was irresistible. To use his own words—Dexter was himself again.

I took Benjamin's arm as we followed him back to the fireplace in the middle of the room. 'There is a chance for me yet,' I whispered. 'Don't forget the signals.'

We returned to the places which we had already occupied. Ariel cast another threatening look at me. She had just sense enough left, after emptying her goblet of wine, to be on the watch for a new interruption on my part. I took care of course that nothing of the sort should happen. I was now as eager as Ariel to hear the story. The subject was full of snares for the narrator. At any moment, in the excitement of speaking, Dexter's memory of the true events might show itself reflected in the circumstances of the fiction. At any moment, he might betray himself.

He looked round him, and began.

'My public, are you seated? My public, are you ready?' he asked, gaily. 'Your face a little more this way,' he added, in his softest and tenderest tones, motioning to me to turn my full face towards

him. 'Surely I am not asking too much? You look at the meanest creature that crawls—look at Me. Let me find my inspiration in your eyes. Let me feed my hungry admiration on your form. Come! have one little pitying smile left for the man whose happiness you have wrecked. Thank you. Light of my Life, thank you!' He kissed his hand to me, and threw himself back luxuriously in his chair. 'The story,' he resumed. 'The story at last! In what form shall I cast it? In the dramatic form—the oldest way, the truest way, the shortest way of telling a story! Title, first. A short title, a taking title: "Mistress and Maid." Scene, the land of romance—Italy. Time, the age of romance—the fifteenth century. Ha! look at Ariel. She knows no more about the fifteenth century than the cat in the kitchen, and yet she is interested already. Happy Ariel!'

Ariel looked at me again, in the double intoxication of the wine and the triumph.

'I know no more than the cat in the

kitchen,' she repeated, with a broad grin of gratified vanity. 'I am "happy Ariel!" What are You?'

Miserrimus Dexter laughed uproariously.

'Didn't I tell you?' he said. 'Isn't she fun? Persons of the Drama,' he resumed:—'Three in number. Women only. Angelica, a noble lady; noble alike in spirit and in birth. Cunegonda, a beautiful devil, in woman's form. Damoride, her unfortunate maid. First scene. A dark vaulted chamber in a castle. Time, evening. The owls are hooting in the wood; the frogs are croaking in the marsh. Look at Ariel! Her flesh creeps; she shudders audibly. Admirable Ariel!'

My rival in the Master's favour eyed me defiantly. 'Admirable Ariel!' she repeated, in drowsy accents. Miserrimus Dexter paused to take up his goblet of Burgundy—placed close at hand on a little sliding table attached to his chair. I watched him narrowly, as he sipped the wine. The flush was still mounting in his

face; the light was still brightening in his eyes. He set down his glass again, with a jovial smack of his lips—and went on.

‘Persons present in the vaulted chamber:—Cunegonda and Damoride. Cunegonda speaks. “Damoride!” “Madam?” “Who lies ill in the chamber above us?” “Madam, the noble lady, Angelica.” (A pause. Cunegonda speaks again). “Damoride!” “Madam?” “How does Angelica like you?” “Madam, the noble lady, sweet and good to all who approach her, is sweet and good to me.” “Have you attended on her, Damoride?” “Sometimes, madam, when the nurse was weary.” “Has she taken her healing medicine from your hand?” “Once or twice, madam, when I happened to be by.” “Damoride, take this key, and open the casket on the table there.” (Damoride obeys.) “Do you see a green vial in the casket?” “I see it, madam.” “Take it out.” (Damoride obeys.) “Do you see a liquid in the green vial? can you guess what it is?” “No, madam.” “Shall I tell you?” (Damoride bows respect-

fully.) "Poison is in the vial." (Damoride starts; she shrinks from the poison; she would fain put it aside. Her mistress signs to her to keep it in her hand; her mistress speaks.) "Damoride, I have told you one of my secrets; shall I tell you another?" (Damoride waits, fearing what is to come. Her mistress speaks.) "I hate the Lady Angelica. Her life stands between me and the joy of my heart. You hold her life in your hand." (Damoride drops on her knees; she is a devout person; she crosses herself, and then she speaks.) "Mistress, you terrify me. Mistress, what do I hear?" (Cunegonda advances, stands over her, looks down on her with terrible eyes, whispers the next words.) "Damoride, the Lady Angelica must die—and I must not be suspected. The Lady Angelica must die—and by your hand."

He paused again. To sip the wine once more? No; to drink a deep draught of it, this time.

Was the stimulant beginning to fail him already?

I looked at him attentively, as he laid himself back again in his chair, to consider for a moment before he went on.

The flush on his face was as deep as ever ; but the brightness in his eyes was beginning to fade already. I had noticed that he spoke more and more slowly as he advanced to the later dialogue of the scene. Was he feeling the effort of invention already ? Had the time come when the wine had done all that the wine could do for him ?

We waited. Ariel sat watching him, with vacantly-staring eyes and vacantly-open mouth. Benjamin, impenetrably expecting the signal, kept his open note-book on his knee, covered by his hand.

Miserrimus Dexter went on.

‘ Damoride hears those terrible words ; Damoride clasps her hands in entreaty. “ Oh, madam ! madam ! how can I kill the dear and noble lady ? What motive have I for harming her ? ” Cunegonda answers, “ You have the motive of obeying Me.” Damoride falls with her face on the floor,

at her mistress's feet. "Madam, I cannot do it! Madam, I dare not do it!" Cune-gonda answers, "You run no risk: I have my plan for diverting discovery from myself, and my plan for diverting discovery from you." Damoride repeats, "I cannot do it! I dare not do it!" Cune-gonda's eyes flash lightnings of rage. She takes from its place of concealment in her bosom——'

He stopped in the middle of the sentence, and put his hand to his head. Not like a man in pain, but like a man who had lost his idea.

Would it be well if I tried to help him to recover his idea? or would it be wiser (if I could only do it) to keep silence?

I could see the drift of his story plainly enough. His object, under the thin disguise of the Italian romance, was to meet my unanswerable objection to suspecting Mrs. Beaulieu's maid—the objection that the woman had no motive for committing herself to an act of murder. If he could practically contradict this, by discovering a

perfectly reasonable and perfectly probable motive, his end would be gained. Those enquiries which I had pledged myself to pursue—those enquiries which might, at any moment, take a turn that directly concerned him—would, in that case, be successfully diverted from the right to the wrong person. The innocent maid would set my strictest scrutiny at defiance ; and Dexter would be safely shielded behind her.

I determined to give him time. Not a word passed my lips.

The minutes followed each other. I waited in the deepest anxiety. It was a trying and a critical moment. If he succeeded in inventing a probable motive, and in shaping it neatly to suit the purpose of his story, he would prove, by that act alone, that there were reserves of mental power still left in him, which the practised eye of the Scotch doctor had failed to see. But the question was—would he do it ?

He did it ! Not in a new way ; not in a convincing way ; not without a painfully-

evident effort. Still, well done, or ill done, he found a motive for the maid.

‘Cunegonda, he resumed, ‘takes from its place of concealment in her bosom a written paper, and unfolds it. “Look at this,” she says. Damoride looks at the paper, and sinks again at her mistress’s feet in a paroxysm of horror and despair. Cunegonda is in possession of a shameful secret in the maid’s past life. Cunegonda can say to her, “Choose your alternative. Either submit to an exposure which disgraces you, and disgraces your parents, for ever—or make up your mind to obey Me.” Damoride might submit to the disgrace if it only affected herself. But her parents are honest people ; she cannot disgrace her parents. She is driven to her last refuge—there is no hope of melting the hard heart of Cunegonda. Her only resource is to raise difficulties ; she tries to show that there are obstacles between her and the crime. “Madam ! madam !” she cries, “how can I do it, when the nurse is there

to see me ? ” Cunegonda answers, “ Sometimes the nurse sleeps ; sometimes the nurse is away.” Damoride still persists. “ Madam ! madam ! the door is kept locked, and the nurse has got the key.” ’

The key ! I instantly thought of the missing key at Gleninch. Had *he* thought of it too ? He certainly checked himself as the word escaped him. I resolved to make the signal ! I rested my elbow on the arm of my chair, and played with my earring. Benjamin took out his pencil, and arranged his note-book, so that Ariel could not see what he was about, if she happened to look his way.

We waited, until it pleased Miserrimus Dexter to proceed. The interval was a long one. His hand went up again to his forehead. A duller and duller look was palpably stealing over his eyes. When he did speak, it was not to go on with the narrative, but to put a question.

‘ Where did I leave off ? ’ he asked.

My hopes sank again as rapidly as they had risen. I managed to answer him,

however, without showing any change in my manner.

‘You left off,’ I said, ‘where Damoride was speaking to Cunegonda——’

‘Yes ! yes !’ he interposed. ‘And what did she say ?’

‘She said, “The door is kept locked, and the nurse has got the key.”’

He instantly leaned forward in his chair.

‘No !’ he answered, vehemently. ‘You’re wrong. “Key ?” Nonsense ! I never said “Key.”’

‘I thought you did, Mr. Dexter.’

‘I never did ! I said something else ; and you have forgotten it.’

I refrained from disputing with him, in fear of what might follow. We waited again. Benjamin, sullenly submitting to my caprices, had taken down the questions and answers that had passed between Dexter and myself. He still mechanically kept his page open, and still held his pencil in readiness to go on. Ariel, quietly submitting to the drowsy influence of the

wine while Dexter's voice was in her ears, felt uneasily the change to silence. She glanced round her restlessly ; she lifted her eyes to ' the Master.'

There he sat, silent, with his hand to his head, still struggling to marshal his wandering thoughts ; still trying to see light through the darkness that was closing round him.

'Master!' cried Ariel, piteously. 'What's become of the story?'

He started as if she had awakened him out of a sleep : he shook his head impatiently, as though he wanted to throw off some oppression that weighed upon it.

'Patience! patience!' he said. 'The story is going on again.'

He dashed at it desperately : he picked up the first lost thread that fell in his way, reckless whether it was the right thread or the wrong one.

'Damoride fell on her knees. She burst into tears. She said——'

He stopped, and looked about him with vacant eyes.

‘What name did I give the other woman?’ he asked ; not putting the question to me, or to either of my companions : asking it of himself, or asking it of the empty air.

‘You called the other woman, Cune-gonda,’ I said.

At the sound of my voice, his eyes turned slowly—turned on me, and yet failed to look at me. Dull and absent, still and changeless, they were eyes that seemed to be fixed on something far away. Even his voice was altered when he spoke next. It had dropped to a quiet, vacant, monotonous tone. I had heard something like it while I was watching by my husband’s bedside, at the time of his delirium—when Eustace’s mind appeared to be too weary to follow his speech. Was the end so near as this ?

‘I called her Cunegonda,’ he repeated.
‘And I called the other——’

He stopped once more.

‘And you called the other Damoride,’
I said.

Ariel looked up at him with a broad stare of bewilderment. She pulled impatiently at the sleeve of his jacket, to attract his notice.

‘Is this the story, Master?’ she asked.

He answered without looking at her; his changeless eyes still fixed, as it seemed, on something far away.

‘This is the story,’ he said, absently. ‘But why Cunegonda? why Damoride? Why not Mistress and Maid? It’s easier to remember Mistress and Maid——’

He hesitated; he shivered as he tried to raise himself in his chair. Then he seemed to rally. ‘What did the Maid say to the Mistress?’ he muttered. ‘What? what? what?’ He hesitated again. Then, something seemed to dawn upon him, unexpectedly. Was it some new thought that had struck him? Or some lost thought that he had recovered? Impossible to say! He went on, suddenly and rapidly went on, in these strange words.

“‘The letter.’” The Maid said, “‘The letter.’” Oh, my heart! Every word a

dagger. A dagger in my heart. Oh, you letter. Horrible, horrible, horrible letter.'

What, in God's name, was he talking about? What did those words mean?

Was he unconsciously pursuing his faint and fragmentary recollections of a past time at Gleninch, under the delusion that he was going on with the story? In the wreck of the other faculties, was memory the last to sink? Was the truth, the dreadful truth, glimmering on me dimly, through the awful shadow cast before it by the advancing eclipse of the brain? My breath failed me; a nameless horror crept through my whole being.

Benjamin, with his pencil in his hand, cast one warning look at me. Ariel was quiet and satisfied. 'Go on, Master,' was all she said. 'I like it! I like it! Go on with the story.'

He went on—like a man sleeping with his eyes open, and talking in his sleep.

'The Maid said to the Mistress. No: the Mistress said to the Maid. The Mistress said, "Show him the letter.

Must, must, must do it." The Maid said, "No. Mustn't do it. Shan't show it. Stuff. Nonsense. Let him suffer. We can get him off. Show it? No. Let the worst come to the worst. Show it then." The Mistress said——' He paused, and waved his hand rapidly to and fro before his eyes, as if he was brushing away some visionary confusion or entanglement. 'Which was it last?' he said, 'Mistress or Maid? Mistress? No. Maid speaks, of course. Loud. Positive. "You scoundrels. Keep away from that table. The Diary's there. Number-Nine, Caldershaws. Ask for Dandie. You shan't have the Diary. A secret in your ear. The Diary will hang him. I won't have him hanged. How dare you touch my chair? My chair is Me? How dare you touch Me?'

The last words burst on me like a gleam of light! I had read them in the Report of the Trial—in the evidence of the sheriff's officer. Miserrimus Dexter had spoken in those very terms, when he had tried vainly to prevent the men from

seizing my husband's papers, and when the men had pushed his chair out of the room. There was no doubt now of what his memory was busy with. The mystery at Gleninch! His last backward flight of thought circled, feebly and more feebly, nearer and nearer to the mystery at Gleninch!

Ariel roused him again. She had no mercy on him; she insisted on hearing the whole story.

‘Why do you stop, Master? Get along with it! get along with it! Tell us quick—what did the Missus say to the Maid?’

He laughed feebly, and tried to imitate her.

‘What did the Missus say to the Maid?’ he repeated. His laugh died away. He went on speaking, more and more vacantly, more and more rapidly. ‘The Mistress said to the Maid, “We’ve got him off. What about the letter? Burn it now. No fire in the grate. No matches in the box. House topsy-turvy. Servants all gone.

Tear it up. Shake it up in the basket. Along with the rest. Shake it up. Waste paper. Throw it away. Gone for ever. Oh, Sara, Sara, Sara. Gone for ever.”’

Ariel clapped her hands, and mimicked him, in her turn.

““ Oh, Sara, Sara, Sara,”’ she repeated. ““ Gone for ever.” That’s prime, Master! Tell us—who was Sara?’

His lips moved. But his voice sank so low that I could barely hear him. He began again, with the old melancholy refrain.

‘The Maid said to the Mistress. No : the Mistress said to the Maid——’ He stopped abruptly, and raised himself erect in the chair ; he threw up both his hands above his head ; and burst into a frightful screaming laugh. ‘Aha-ha-ha-ha ! How funny ! Why don’t you laugh ? Funny, funny, funny, funny. Aha-ha-ha-ha-ha——’

He fell back in the chair. The shrill and dreadful laugh died away into a low sob. Then there was one long, deep, wearily-drawn breath. Then, nothing but

a mute vacant face turned up to the ceiling, with eyes that looked blindly, with lips parted in a senseless, changeless grin. Nemesis at last ! The foretold doom had fallen on him. The night had come.

But one feeling animated me, when the first shock was over. Even the horror of that fearful sight seemed only to increase the pity that I felt for the stricken wretch. I started impulsively to my feet. Seeing nothing, thinking of nothing, but the helpless figure in the chair, I sprang forward to raise him ; to revive him ; to recall him (if such a thing might be possible) to himself. At the first step that I took, I felt hands on me—I was violently drawn back. ‘Are you blind ?’ cried Benjamin, dragging me nearer and nearer to the door. ‘Look there !’

He pointed ; and I looked.

Ariel had been beforehand with me. She had raised her master in the chair ; she had got one arm round him. In her free hand she brandished an Indian club,

torn from a 'trophy' of Oriental weapons that ornamented the wall over the fireplace. The creature was transfigured ! Her dull eyes glared like the eyes of a wild animal. She gnashed her teeth in the frenzy that possessed her. 'You have done this !' she shouted to me, waving the club furiously round and round over her head. 'Come near him ; and I'll dash your brains out ! I'll mash you till there's not a whole bone left in your skin !' Benjamin, still holding me with one hand, opened the door with the other. I let him do with me as he would ; Ariel fascinated me ; I could look at nothing but Ariel. Her frenzy vanished as she saw us retreating. She dropped the club ; she threw both arms round him, and nestled her head on his bosom, and sobbed and wept over him. 'Master ! Master ! They shan't vex you any more. Look up again. Laugh at me as you used to do. Say, "Ariel ; you're a fool." Be like yourself again !' I was forced into the next room. I heard a long, low, wailing

cry of misery from the poor creature who loved him with a dog's fidelity and a woman's devotion. The heavy door was closed between us. I was in the quiet antechamber; crying over that piteous sight; clinging to my kind old friend, as helpless and as useless as a child.

Benjamin turned the key in the lock.

'There's no use in crying about it,' he said, quietly. 'It would be more to the purpose, Valeria, if you thanked God that you have got out of that room, safe and sound. Come with me.'

He took the key out of the lock, and led me downstairs into the hall. After a little consideration, he opened the front door of the house. The gardener was still quietly at work in the grounds.

'Your master is taken ill,' Benjamin said; 'and the woman who attends upon him has lost her head—if she ever had a head to lose. Where does the nearest doctor live?'

The man's devotion to Dexter showed

itself as the woman's devotion had shown itself—in the man's rough way. He threw down the spade, with an oath.

‘The Master taken bad?’ he said. ‘I’ll fetch the doctor. I shall find him sooner than you will.’

‘Tell the doctor to bring a man with him,’ Benjamin added. ‘He may want help.’

The gardener turned round sternly.

‘*I’m* the man,’ he said. ‘Nobody shall help but me.’

He left us. I sat down on one of the chairs in the hall, and did my best to compose myself. Benjamin walked to and fro, deep in thought. ‘Both of them fond of him,’ I heard my old friend say to himself. ‘Half monkey, half man—and both of them fond of him. *That* beats me.’

The gardener returned with the doctor—a quiet, dark, resolute man. Benjamin advanced to meet them. ‘I have got the key,’ he said. ‘Shall I go upstairs with you?’

Without answering, the doctor drew Benjamin aside into a corner of the hall. The two talked together in low voices. At

the end of it, the doctor said, 'Give me the key. You can be of no use ; you will only irritate her.'

With those words, he beckoned to the gardener. He was about to lead the way up the stairs, when I ventured to stop him.

'May I stay in the hall, Sir ?' I said. 'I am very anxious to hear how it ends.'

He looked at me for a moment before he replied.

'You had better go home, Madam,' he said. 'Is the gardener acquainted with your address ?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'Very well. I will let you know how it ends, by means of the gardener. Take my advice. Go home.'

Benjamin placed my arm in his. I looked back, and saw the doctor and the gardener ascending the stairs together, on their way to the locked-up room.

'Never mind the doctor !' I whispered. 'Let's wait in the garden.'

Benjamin would not hear of deceiving the doctor. 'I mean to take you home,'

he said. I looked at him in amazement. My old friend, who was all meekness and submission, so long as there was no emergency to try him, now showed the dormant reserve of manly spirit and decision in his nature, as he had never (in my experience) shown it yet. He led me into the garden. We had kept our cab : it was waiting for us at the gate.

On our way home, Benjamin produced his note-book.

‘What’s to be done, my dear, with the gibberish that I have written here?’ he said.

‘Have you written it all down?’ I asked, in surprise.

‘When I undertake a duty I do it,’ he answered. ‘You never gave me the signal to leave off—you never moved your chair. I have written every word of it. What shall I do? Throw it out of the cab-window?’

‘Give it to me!’

‘What are you going to do with it?’

‘I don’t know yet. I will ask Mr. Playmore.’

CHAPTER XLI.

MR. PLAYMORE IN A NEW CHARACTER.

By that night's post—although I was far from being fit to make the exertion—I wrote to Mr. Playmore, to tell him what had taken place, and to beg for his earliest assistance and advice.

The notes in Benjamin's book were partly written in short-hand, and were, on that account, of no use to me in their existing condition. At my request, he made two fair copies. One of the copies I enclosed in my letter to Mr. Playmore. The other I laid by me, on my bedside table, when I went to rest.

Over and over again, through the long hours of the wakeful night, I read and re-read the last words which had dropped

from Miserrimus Dexter's lips. Was it possible to interpret them to any useful purpose? At the very outset, they seemed to set interpretation at defiance. After trying vainly to solve the hopeless problem, I did at last what I might as well have done at first—I threw down the paper in despair. Where were my bright visions of discovery and success, now? Scattered to the winds! Was there the faintest chance of the stricken man's return to reason? I remembered too well what I had seen to hope for it. The closing lines of the medical report which I had read in Mr. Playmore's office recurred to my memory, in the stillness of the night. 'When the catastrophe has happened, his friends can entertain no hope of his cure: the balance once lost, will be lost for life.'

The confirmation of that terrible sentence was not long in reaching me. The next morning the gardener brought a note, containing the information which the doctor had promised to give me on the previous day.

Miserrimus Dexter and Ariel were still where Benjamin and I had left them together—in the long room. They were watched by skilled attendants ; waiting the decision of Dexter's nearest relative (a younger brother), who lived in the country, and who had been communicated with by telegraph. It had been found impossible to part the faithful Ariel from her Master, without using the bodily restraints adopted in cases of raging insanity. The doctor and the gardener (both unusually strong men) had failed to hold the poor creature, when they first attempted to remove her on entering the room. Directly they permitted her to return to her Master, the frenzy vanished : she was perfectly quiet and contented, so long as they let her sit at his feet and look at him.

Sad as this was, the report of Miserrimus Dexter's condition was more melancholy still.

‘ My patient is in a state of absolute imbecility ’—those were the words in the doctor's letter ; and the gardener's simple

narrative confirmed them as the truest words that could have been used. Dexter was unconscious of poor Ariel's devotion to him—he did not even appear to know that she was present in the room. For hours together, he remained in a state of utter lethargy in his chair. He showed an animal interest in his meals, and a greedy animal enjoyment of eating and drinking as much as he could get—and that was all. 'This morning,' the honest gardener said to me at parting, 'we thought he seemed to wake up a bit. Looked about him, you know, and made queer signs with his hands. I couldn't make out what he meant; no more could the doctor. *She* knew, poor thing—she did. Went and got him his harp, and put his hand up to it. Lord bless you, no use! He couldn't play, no more than I can. Twanged at it anyhow, and grinned and gabbled to himself. No: he'll never come right again. Any person can see that, without the doctor to help 'em. Enjoys his meals, as I told you; and that's all. It would be the best thing that could

happen, if it would please God to take him. There's no more to be said. I wish you good morning, Ma'am.'

He went away with the tears in his eyes ; and left me, I own it, with the tears in mine.

An hour later, there came some news which revived me. I received a telegram from Mr. Playmore, expressed in these welcome words : 'Obliged to go to London by to-night's mail train. Expect me to breakfast to-morrow morning.'

The appearance of the lawyer at our breakfast-table duly followed the appearance of his telegram. His first words cheered me. To my infinite surprise and relief, he was far from sharing the despondent view which I took of my position.

'I don't deny,' he said, 'that there are some serious obstacles in your way. But I should never have called here before I attend to my professional business in London, if Mr. Benjamin's notes had not produced a very strong impression on my

mind. For the first time, as *I* think—you really have a prospect of success. For the first time, I feel justified in offering (under certain restrictions) to help you. That miserable wretch, in the collapse of his intelligence, has done what he would never have done in the possession of his sense and cunning—he has let us see the first precious glimmerings of the light of truth.'

'Are you sure it *is* the truth?' I asked.

'In two important particulars,' he answered, 'I know it to be the truth. Your idea about him is the right one. His memory (as you suppose) was the least injured of his faculties, and was the last to give way, under the strain of trying to tell that story. I believe his memory to have been speaking to you (unconsciously to himself) in all that he said—from the moment when the first reference to "the letter" escaped him, to the end.'

'But what does the reference to the letter mean?' I asked. 'For my part, I am entirely in the dark about it.'

'So am I,' he answered, frankly. 'The

chief one among the obstacles which I mentioned just now, is the obstacle presented by that same "letter." The late Mrs. Eustace must have been connected with it in some way—or Dexter would never have spoken of it as "a dagger in his heart;" Dexter would never have coupled her name with the words which describe the tearing up of the letter, and the throwing of it away. I can arrive with some certainty at this result, and I can get no further. I have no more idea than you have of who wrote the letter, or of what was written in it. If we are ever to make that discovery—probably the most important discovery of all—we must despatch our first enquiries a distance of three thousand miles. In plain English, my dear lady, we must send to America.'

This, naturally enough, took me completely by surprise. I waited eagerly to hear why we were to send to America.

'It rests with you,' he proceeded, 'when you hear what I have to tell you, to say whether you will go to the expense of send-

ing a man to New York, or not. I can find the right man for the purpose ; and I estimate the expense (including a telegram)——’

‘Never mind the expense!’ I interposed, losing all patience with the eminently Scotch view of the case which put my purse in the first place of importance. ‘I don’t care for the expense ; I want to know what you have discovered.’

He smiled. ‘She doesn’t care for the expense,’ he said to himself, pleasantly. ‘How like a woman!’

I might have retorted, ‘He thinks of the expense, before he thinks of anything else. How like a Scotchman!’ As it was, I was too anxious to be witty. I only drummed impatiently with my fingers on the table ; and said, ‘Tell me ! tell me!’

He took out the fair copy from Benjamin’s note-book, which I had sent to him, and showed me these among Dexter’s closing words : ‘What about the letter ? Burn it now. No fire in the grate. No

matches in the box. House topsy-turvy. Servants all gone.'

'Do you really understand what those words mean?' I asked.

'I look back into my own experience,' he answered; 'and I understand perfectly what the words mean.'

'And can you make me understand them too?'

'Easily. In those incomprehensible sentences, Dexter's memory has correctly recalled certain facts. I have only to tell you the facts; and you will be as wise as I am. At the time of the Trial, your husband surprised and distressed me by insisting on the instant dismissal of all the household servants at Gleninch. I was instructed to pay them a quarter's wages in advance; to give them the excellent written characters which their good conduct thoroughly deserved, and to see the house clear of them at an hour's notice. Eustace's motive for this summary proceeding was much the same motive which animated his conduct towards you. "If I am ever to return to

Gleninch," he said, "I cannot face my honest servants, after the infamy of having stood my trial for murder." There was his reason ! Nothing that I could say to him, poor fellow, shook his resolution. I dismissed the servants accordingly. At an hour's notice, they quitted the house, leaving their work for the day all undone. The only persons placed in charge of Gleninch were persons who lived on the outskirts of the park—that is to say, the lodge-keeper and his wife and daughter. On the last day of the Trial, I instructed the daughter to do her best to make the rooms tidy. She was a good girl enough ; but she had no experience as a housemaid : it would never enter her head to lay the bedroom fires ready for lighting, or to replenish the empty match-boxes. Those chance words that dropped from Dexter would, no doubt, exactly describe the state of his room, when he returned to Gleninch, with the prisoner and his mother, from Edinburgh. That he tore up the mysterious letter in his bedroom, and (finding no means

immediately at hand for burning it) that he threw the fragments into the empty grate, or into the waste-paper basket, seems to be the most reasonable conclusion that we can draw from what we know. In any case, he would not have much time to think about it. Everything was done in a hurry on that day. Eustace and his mother, accompanied by Dexter, left for England the same evening by the night-train. I myself locked up the house, and gave the keys to the lodge-keeper. It was understood that he was to look after the preservation of the reception-rooms on the ground floor; and that his wife and daughter were to perform the same service, between them, in the rooms upstairs. On receiving your letter, I drove at once to Gleninch, to question the old woman on the subject of the bedrooms, and of Dexter's room especially. She remembered the time when the house was shut up, by associating it with the time when she was confined to her bed by an attack of sciatica. She had not crossed the lodge-door, she was sure, for at least a

week (if not longer) after Gleninch had been left in charge of her husband and herself. Whatever was done in the way of keeping the bedrooms aired and tidy, during her illness, was done by her daughter. She, and she only, must have disposed of any litter which might have been lying about in Dexter's room. Not a vestige of torn paper, as I can myself certify, is to be discovered in any part of the room, now. Where did the girl find the fragments of the letter ? and what did she do with them ? Those are the questions (if you approve of it) which we must send three thousand miles away to ask—for this sufficient reason, that the lodge-keeper's daughter was married more than a year since, and that she is settled with her husband in business at New York. It rests with you to decide what is to be done. Don't let me mislead you with false hopes ! Don't let me tempt you to throw away your money ! Even if this woman does remember what she did with the torn paper, the chances, at this distance of time, are enormously against

our ever recovering a single morsel of it. Be in no haste to decide. I have my work to do in the City—I can give you the whole day to think it over.’

‘Send the man to New York by the next steamer,’ I said. ‘There is my decision, Mr. Playmore, without keeping you waiting for it!’

He shook his head, in grave disapproval of my impetuosity. In my former interview with him, we had never once touched on the question of money. I was now, for the first time, to make acquaintance with Mr. Playmore on the purely Scotch side of his character!

‘Why, you don’t even know what it will cost you!’ he exclaimed, taking out his pocket-book with the air of a man who was equally startled and scandalised. ‘Wait till I tot it up,’ he said, ‘in English and American money.’

‘I can’t wait! I want to make more discoveries!’

He took no notice of my interruption: he went on impenetrably with his calculations.

‘The man will go second-class, and will take a return-ticket. Very well. His ticket includes his food; and (being, thank God, a tee-totaller) he won’t waste your money in buying liquor on board. Arrived at New York, he will go to a cheap German house, where he will, as I am credibly informed, be boarded and lodged at the rate——’

By this time (my patience being completely worn out) I had taken my cheque-book from the table-drawer; had signed my name; and had handed the blank cheque across the table to my legal adviser.

‘Fill it in with whatever the man wants,’ I said. ‘And for Heaven’s sake let us get back to Dexter!’

Mr. Playmore fell back in his chair, and lifted his hands and eyes to the ceiling. I was not in the least impressed by that solemn appeal to the unseen powers of arithmetic and money. I insisted positively on being fed with more information.

‘Listen to this,’ I went on; reading from Benjamin’s notes. ‘What did Dexter mean, when he said, “Number Nine, Caldershaws. Ask for Dandie. You shan’t have the Diary. A secret in your ear. The Diary will hang him?” How came Dexter to know what was in my husband’s Diary? And what does he mean by “Number Nine, Caldershaws,” and the rest of it? Facts again?’

‘Facts again!’ Mr. Playmore answered, ‘muddled up together, as you may say—but positive facts for all that. Caldershaws, you must know, is one of the most disreputable districts in Edinburgh. One of my clerks (whom I am in the habit of employing confidentially) volunteered to enquire for “Dandie,” at “Number nine.” It was a ticklish business, in every way; and my man wisely took a person with him who was known in the neighbourhood. “Number nine” turned out to be (ostensibly) a shop for the sale of rags and old iron; and “Dandie” was suspected of trading now and then, additionally, as a

receiver of stolen goods. Thanks to the influence of his companion, backed by a bank-note (which can be repaid, by the way, out of the fund for the American expenses), my clerk succeeded in making the fellow speak. Not to trouble you with needless details, the result in substance was this. A fortnight or more before the date of Mrs. Eustace's death, "Dandie" made two keys from wax models supplied to him by a new customer. The mystery observed in the matter by the agent who managed it, excited Dandie's distrust. He had the man privately watched before he delivered the keys; and he ended in discovering that his customer was—Miserrimus Dexter. Wait a little! I have not done yet. Add to this information Dexter's incomprehensible knowledge of the contents of your husband's Diary; and the product is—that the wax models sent to the old iron shop in Caldershaws, were models taken by theft from the key of the Diary and the key of the table-drawer in which it was

kept. I have my own idea of the revelations that are still to come, if this matter is properly followed up. Never mind going into that, at present. Dexter (I tell you again) is answerable for the late Mrs. Eustace's death. *How* he is answerable, I believe you are in a fair way of finding out. And, more than that, I say now, what I could not venture to say before—it is a duty towards Justice, as well as a duty towards your husband, to bring the truth to light. As for the difficulties to be encountered, I don't think they need daunt you. The greatest difficulties give way in the end, when they are attacked by the united alliance of patience, resolution, — *and* economy.'

With a strong emphasis on the last words, my worthy adviser, mindful of the flight of time and the claims of business, rose to take his leave.

'One word more,' I said, as he held out his hand. 'Can you manage to see Miserrimus Dexter before you go back to Edinburgh? From what the gardener

told me, his brother must be with him by this time. It would be a relief to me to hear the latest news of him, and to hear it from you.'

'It is part of my business in London to see him,' said Mr. Playmore. 'But, mind! I have no hope of his recovery: I only wish to satisfy myself that his brother is able and willing to take care of him. So far as *we* are concerned, Mrs. Eustace, that unhappy man has said his last words.'

He opened the door—stopped—considered—and came back to me.

'With regard to that matter of sending the agent to America,' he resumed. 'I propose to have the honour of submitting to you a brief abstract——'

'Oh, Mr. Playmore!'

'A brief abstract in writing, Mrs. Eustace, of the estimated expenses of the whole proceeding. You will be good enough maturely to consider the same; making any remarks on it, tending to economy, which may suggest themselves

to your mind at the time. And you will further oblige me, if you approve of the abstract, by yourself filling in the blank space on your cheque with the needful amount in words and figures. No, Madam ! I really cannot justify it to my conscience to carry about my person any such loose and reckless document as a blank cheque. There's a total disregard of the first claims of prudence and economy, implied in this small slip of paper, which is nothing less than a flat contradiction of the principles that have governed my whole life. I can't submit to flat contradiction. Good morning, Mrs. Eustace—good morning.'

He laid my cheque on the table with a low bow, and left me. Among the curious developments of human stupidity which occasionally present themselves to view, surely the least excusable is the stupidity which, to this day, persists in wondering why the Scotch succeed so well in life !

CHAPTER XLII.

MORE SURPRISES !

THE same evening I received my 'abstract' by the hands of a clerk.

It was an intensely characteristic document. My expenses were remorselessly calculated down to shillings and even to pence; and our unfortunate messenger's instructions, in respect of his expenditure, were reduced to a nicety which must have made his life in America nothing less than a burden to him. In mercy to the man, I took the liberty, when I wrote back to Mr. Playmore, of slightly increasing the indicated amount of the figures which were to appear on the cheque. I ought to have better known the correspondent whom I had to deal with. Mr. Playmore's reply

(informing me that our emissary had started on his voyage) returned a receipt in due form—and the whole of the surplus money, to the last farthing !

A few hurried lines accompanied the 'abstract,' and stated the result of the lawyer's visit to Miserrimus Dexter.

There was no change for the better—there was no change at all. Mr. Dexter (the brother) had arrived at the house, accompanied by a medical man accustomed to the charge of the insane. The new doctor declined to give any definite opinion on the case until he had studied it carefully with plenty of time at his disposal. It had been accordingly arranged that he should remove Miserrimus Dexter to the asylum of which he was the proprietor, as soon as the preparations for receiving the patient could be completed. The one difficulty that still remained to be met, related to the disposal of the faithful creature who had never left her master, night or day, since the catastrophe had happened. Ariel had no friends, and no money. The proprietor

of the asylum could not be expected to receive her without the customary payment ; and Mr. Dexter's brother 'regretted to say that he was not rich enough to find the money.' A forcible separation from the one human being whom she loved, and a removal in the character of a pauper to a public asylum—such was the prospect which awaited the unfortunate creature, unless some one interfered in her favour before the end of the week.

Under these sad circumstances, good Mr. Playmore—passing over the claims of economy in favour of the claims of humanity—suggested that we should privately start a Subscription, and offered to head the list liberally himself.

I must have written all these pages to very little purpose, if it is necessary for me to add that I instantly sent a letter to Mr. Dexter (the brother), undertaking to be answerable for whatever money was required, while the subscriptions were being collected, and only stipulating that when Miserrimus Dexter was removed to the

asylum, Ariel should accompany him. This was readily conceded. But serious objections were raised, when I further requested that she might be permitted to attend on her master in the asylum, as she had attended on him in the house. The rules of the establishment forbade it, and the universal practice in such cases forbade it, and so on, and so on. However, by dint of perseverance, and persuasion, I so far carried my point as to gain a reasonable concession. During certain hours in the day, and under certain wise restrictions, Ariel was to be allowed the privilege of waiting on the Master in his room, as well as of accompanying him when he was brought out in his chair to take the air in the garden. For the honour of humanity, let me add, that the liability which I had undertaken made no very serious demands on my resources. Placed in Benjamin's charge, our subscription list prospered. Friends, and even strangers sometimes, opened their hearts and their purses when they heard Ariel's melancholy story.

The day which followed the day of Mr. Playmore's visit brought me news from Spain, in a letter from my mother-in-law. To describe what I felt, when I broke the seal, and read the first lines, is simply impossible. Let Mrs. Macallan be heard on this occasion in my place.

Thus she wrote :—

‘ Prepare yourself, my dearest Valeria, for a delightful surprise. Eustace has justified my confidence in him. When he returns to England, he returns—if you will let him—to his wife.

‘ This resolution, let me hasten to assure you, has not been brought about by any persuasions of mine. It is the natural outgrowth of your husband's gratitude and your husband's love. The first words he said to me, when he was able to speak, were these : “ If I live to return to England, and if I go to Valeria, do you think she will forgive me ? ” We can only leave it to you, my dear, to give the answer. If you love us, answer us by return of post.

‘ Having now told you what he said,

when I first informed him that you had been his nurse—and remember, if it seems very little, that he is still too weak to speak, except with difficulty—I shall purposely keep my letter back for a few days. My object is to give him time to think, and to frankly tell you of it, if the interval produces any change in his resolution.

‘Three days have passed ; and there is no change. He has but one feeling now—he longs for the day which is to unite him again to his wife.

‘But there is something else connected with Eustace, that you ought to know, and that I ought to tell you.

‘Greatly as time and suffering have altered him, in many respects, there is no change, Valeria, in the aversion—the horror I may even say—with which he views your design of enquiring anew into the circumstances which attended the lamentable death of his first wife. I dare not give him your letter : if I touch on the subject, I irritate and distress him. “Has she given up that idea ? Can you positively

say she has given up that idea ? ” Over and over again, he has put those questions to me. I have answered—what else could I do, in the miserably feeble state in which he still lies ?—I have answered in such a manner as to soothe and satisfy him. I have said : “ Relieve your mind of all anxiety on that subject : Valeria has no choice but to give up the idea ; the obstacles in her way have proved to be insurmountable—the obstacles have conquered her.” This, if you remember, was what I really believed would happen when you and I spoke of that painful topic ; and I have heard nothing from you since which has tended to shake my opinion in the smallest degree. If I am right (as I pray God I may be) in the view that I take, you have only to confirm me in your reply, and all will be well. In the other event—that is to say, if you are still determined to persevere in your hopeless project—then make up your mind to face the result. Set Eustace’s prejudices at defiance in this particular ; and you lose your hold on his grati-

tude, his penitence, and his love—you will, in my belief, never see him again.

‘I express myself strongly, in your own interests, my dear, and for your own sake. When you reply write a few lines to Eustace, enclosed in your letter to me.

‘As for the date of our departure, it is still impossible for me to give you any definite information. Eustace recovers very slowly: the doctor has not yet allowed him to leave his bed. And when we do travel, we must journey by easy stages. It will be at least six weeks, at the earliest, before we can hope to be back again in dear Old England.

‘Affectionately yours,

‘CATHERINE MACALLAN;’

I laid down the letter, and did my best (vainly enough for some time) to compose my spirits. To understand the position in which I now found myself, it is only necessary to remember one circumstance. The messenger to whom we had committed our

enquiries was, at that moment, crossing the Atlantic on his way to New York.

What was to be done ?

I hesitated. Shocking as it may seem to some people, I hesitated. There was really no need to hurry my decision. I had the whole day before me.

I went out, and took a wretched, lonely walk, and turned the matter over in my mind. I came home again, and turned the matter over once more, by the fireside. To offend and repel my darling when he was returning to me, penitently returning of his own free will, was what no woman in my position, and feeling as I did, could under any earthly circumstances have brought herself to do. And yet, on the other hand, how in Heaven's name could I give up my grand enterprise, at the very time when even wise and prudent Mr. Playmore saw such a prospect of succeeding in it that he had actually volunteered to help me ? Placed between those two cruel alternatives, which could I choose ? Think of your own frailties ; and have

some mercy on mine. I turned my back on both the alternatives. Those two agreeable fiends, Prevarication and Deceit, took me as it were softly by the hand : ‘Don’t commit yourself either way, my dear,’ they said, in their most persuasive manner. ‘Write just enough to compose your mother-in-law, and to satisfy your husband. You have got time before you. Wait and see if Time doesn’t stand your friend, and get you out of the difficulty.’

Infamous advice ! And yet, I took it—I, who had been well brought up, and who ought to have known better. You who read this shameful confession, would have known better, I am sure. *You* are not included, in the Prayer Book category, among the ‘miserable sinners.’

Well ! well ! let me have virtue enough to tell the truth. In writing to my mother-in-law, I informed her that it had been found necessary to remove Miserrimus Dexter to an asylum—and I left her to draw her own conclusions from that fact, unenlightened by so much as one word of

additional information. In the same way, I told my husband a part of the truth, and no more. I said I forgave him with all my heart—and I did ! I said he had only to come to me, and I would receive him with open arms—and so I would ! As for the rest, let me say, with Hamlet : ‘The rest is silence.’

Having despatched my unworthy letters, I found myself growing restless, and feeling the want of a change. It would be necessary to wait at least eight or nine days before we could hope to hear by telegraph from New York. I bade farewell for a time to my dear and admirable Benjamin, and betook myself to my old home in the North, at the Vicarage of my Uncle Starkweather. My journey to Spain to nurse Eustace had made my peace with my worthy relatives ; we had exchanged friendly letters ; and I had promised to be their guest as soon as it was possible for me to leave London.

I passed a quiet, and (all things considered) a happy time, among the old scenes.

I visited once more the bank by the river side, where Eustace and I had first met. I walked again on the lawn, and loitered through the shrubbery — those favourite haunts in which we had so often talked over our troubles, and so often forgotten them in a kiss. How sadly and strangely had our lives been parted since that time! How uncertain still was the fortune which the future had in store for us !

The associations amid which I was now living, had their softening effect on my heart, their elevating influence over my mind. I reproached myself, bitterly reproached myself, for not having written more fully and frankly to Eustace. Why had I hesitated to sacrifice to him my hopes and my interests in the coming investigation ? *He* had not hesitated, poor fellow — *his* first thought was the thought of his wife !

I had passed a fortnight with my uncle and aunt, before I heard again from Mr. Playmore. When a letter from him arrived at last, it disappointed me indescribably.

A telegram from our messenger informed us that the lodge-keeper's daughter and her husband had left New York, and that he was still in search of a trace of them.

There was nothing to be done but to wait as patiently as we could, on the chance of hearing better news. I remained in the North, by Mr. Playmore's advice, so as to be within an easy journey to Edinburgh—in case it might be necessary for me to consult him personally. Three more weeks of weary expectation passed, before a second letter reached me. This time it was impossible to say whether the news was good or bad. It might have been either—it was simply bewildering. Even Mr. Playmore himself was taken by surprise. These were the last wonderful words—limited, of course, by considerations of economy—which reached us (by telegram) from our agent in America:—

‘Open the dust-heap at Gleninch.’

CHAPTER XLIII.

AT LAST !

My letter from Mr. Playmore, enclosing the agent's extraordinary telegram, was not inspired by the sanguine view of our prospects which he had expressed to me when we met at Benjamin's house.

‘If the telegram means anything,’ he wrote, ‘it means that the fragments of the torn letter have been cast into the housemaid's bucket (along with the dust, the ashes, and the rest of the litter in the room), and have been emptied on the dust-heap at Gleninch. Since this was done, the accumulated refuse collected from the periodical cleansings of the house, during a term of nearly three years—including, of course, the ashes from the fires kept burning, for the

greater part of the year, in the library and the picture gallery—have been poured upon the heap, and have buried the precious morsels of paper deeper and deeper, day by day. Even if we have a fair chance of finding these fragments, what hope can we feel, at this distance of time, of recovering them with the writing in a state of preservation? I shall be glad to hear, by return of post, if possible, how the matter strikes you. If you could make it convenient to consult with me personally in Edinburgh, we should save time, when time may be of serious importance to us. While you are at Doctor Starkweather's, you are within easy reach of this place. Please think of it.'

I thought of it seriously enough. The foremost question which I had to consider was the question of my husband.

The departure of the mother and son from Spain had been so long delayed, by the surgeon's orders, that the travellers had only advanced on their homeward journey as far as Bordeaux, when I had last heard

from Mrs. Macallan three or four days since. Allowing for an interval of repose at Bordeaux, and for the slow rate at which they would be compelled to move afterwards, I might still expect them to arrive in England some time before a letter from the agent in America could reach Mr. Playmore. How, in this position of affairs, I could contrive to join the lawyer in Edinburgh, after meeting my husband in London, it was not easy to see. The wise way and the right way, as I thought, was to tell Mr. Playmore frankly that I was not mistress of my own movements, and that he had better address his next letter to me at Benjamin's house.

Writing to my legal adviser in this sense, I had a word of my own to add, about the dust-heap and the torn letter.

In the last years of my father's life I had travelled with him in Italy; and I had seen in the Museum at Naples the wonderful relics of a bygone time discovered among the ruins of Pompeii. By way of encouraging Mr. Playmore, I now reminded him

that the eruption which had overwhelmed the town had preserved, for more than sixteen hundred years, such perishable things as the straw in which pottery had been packed ; the paintings on house walls ; the dresses worn by the inhabitants ; and (most noticeable of all, in our case) a piece of ancient paper, still attached to the volcanic ashes which had fallen over it. If these discoveries had been made after a lapse of sixteen centuries, under a layer of dust and ashes on a large scale, surely we might hope to meet with similar cases of preservation, after a lapse of three or four years only, under a layer of dust and ashes on a small scale ? Taking for granted (what was perhaps doubtful enough) that the fragments of the letter could be recovered, my own conviction was that the writing on them, though it might be faded, would certainly still be legible. The very accumulations which Mr. Playmore deplored would be the means of preserving them from the rain and the damp. With these modest hints I closed my letter ; and thus

for once, thanks to my Continental experience, I was able to instruct my lawyer!

Another day passed; and I heard nothing of the travellers.

I began to feel anxious. I made my preparations for the journey southward, over night; and I resolved to start for London the next day—unless I heard of some change in Mrs. Macallan's travelling arrangements in the interval.

The post of the next morning decided my course of action. It brought me a letter from my mother-in-law, which added one more to the memorable dates in my domestic calendar.

Eustace and his mother had advanced as far as Paris on their homeward journey, when a cruel disaster had befallen them. The fatigues of travelling, and the excitement of his anticipated meeting with me, had proved together to be too much for my husband. He had held out as far as Paris with the greatest difficulty; and he was now confined to his bed again, struck down by a relapse. The doctors, this time, had no

fear for his life ; provided that his patience would support him through a lengthened period of the most absolute repose.

‘ It now rests with you, Valeria,’ Mrs. Macallan wrote, ‘ to fortify and comfort Eustace under this new calamity. Do not suppose that he has ever blamed, or thought of blaming, you, for leaving him in Spain, when the surgeon had pronounced him to be out of danger. “ It was *I* who left *her*,” he said to me, when we first talked about it ; “ and it is my wife’s right to expect that I should go back to her.” Those were his words, my dear ; and he has done all he can to abide by them. Helpless in his bed, he now asks you to take the will for the deed, and to join him in Paris. I think I know you well enough, my child, to be sure that you will do this ; and I need only add one word of caution, before I close my letter. Avoid all reference, not only to the Trial (you will do that of your own accord), but even to our house at Gleninch. You will understand how he feels, in his present state of nervous depression, when I tell

you that I should never have ventured on asking you to join him here, if your letter had not informed me that your visits to Dexter were at an end. Would you believe it?—his horror of anything which recalls our past troubles is still so vivid, that he has actually asked me to give my consent to selling Gleninch !’

So Eustace’s mother wrote of him. But she had not trusted entirely to her own powers of persuasion. A slip of paper was enclosed in her letter, containing these two lines, traced in pencil—oh, so feebly and so wearily !—by my poor darling himself : ‘ I am too weak to travel any further, Valeria. Will you come to me and forgive me ? ’ A few pencil-marks followed ; but they were illegible. The writing of those two short sentences had exhausted him.

It is not saying much for myself, I know—but, having confessed it when I was wrong, let me at least record it when I did what was right—I decided instantly on giving up all further connection with the recovery of the torn letter. If Eustace

asked me the question, I was resolved to be able to answer truly: 'I have made the sacrifice that assures your tranquillity. When resignation was hardest, I have given way for my husband's sake.'

The motive which had determined me on returning to England, when I first knew that I was mother as well as wife, was still present to my mind when I arrived at this resolution. The one change in me was, that I now treated my husband's tranquillity as the first and foremost consideration. In making this concession, I was not without hope to sustain me. Eustace might yet see the duty of asserting his innocence, in a new light—he might see it as a duty which the father owed to the child.

That morning, I wrote again to Mr. Playmore; telling him what my position was, and withdrawing, definitely, from all share in investigating the mystery which lay hidden under the dust-heap at Gleninch.

CHAPTER XLIV.

OUR NEW HONEYMOON.

It is not to be disguised or denied that my spirits were depressed, on my journey to London.

To resign the one cherished purpose of my life, when I had suffered so much in pursuing it, and when I had (to all appearance) so nearly reached the realisation of my hopes, was putting to a hard trial a woman's fortitude, and a woman's sense of duty. Still, even if the opportunity had been offered to me, I would not have recalled my letter to Mr. Playmore. 'It is done, and well done,' I said to myself; 'and I have only to wait a day to be reconciled to it—when I give my husband my first kiss.'

I had planned and hoped to reach London, in time to start for Paris by the night-mail. But the train was twice delayed on the long journey from the North ; and there was no help for it but to sleep at Benjamin's villa, and to defer my departure until the morning.

It was, of course, impossible for me to warn my old friend of the change in my plans. My arrival took him by surprise. I found him alone in his library, with a wonderful illumination of lamps and candles ; absorbed over some morsels of torn paper scattered on the table before him.

‘What in the world are you about ?’ I asked.

Benjamin blushed—I was going to say, like a young girl. But young girls have given up blushing in these latter days of the age we live in.

‘Oh, nothing, nothing!’ he said, confusedly. ‘Don’t notice it.’

He stretched out his hand to brush the morsels of paper off the table. Those

morsels raised a sudden suspicion in my mind. I stopped him.

‘ You have heard from Mr. Playmore ! ’
I said. ‘ Tell me the truth, Benjamin.
Yes, or No ? ’

Benjamin blushed a shade deeper, and answered ‘ Yes. ’

‘ Where is the letter ? ’

‘ I mustn’t show it to you, Valeria. ’

This (need I say it ?) made me determined to see the letter. My best way of persuading Benjamin to show it to me was to tell him of the sacrifice that I had made to my husband’s wishes. ‘ I have no further voice in the matter,’ I added, when I had done. ‘ It now rests entirely with Mr. Playmore to go on or to give up ; and this is my last opportunity of discovering what he really thinks about it. Don’t I deserve some little indulgence ? Have I no claim to look at the letter ? ’

Benjamin was too much surprised, and too much pleased with me, when he heard what had happened, to be able to resist my entreaties. He gave me the letter.

Mr. Playmore wrote, to appeal confidentially to Benjamin as a commercial man. In the long course of his occupation in business, it was just possible that he might have heard of cases in which documents had been put together again, after having been torn up, by design or by accident. Even if his experience failed in this particular, he might be able to refer to some authority in London who would be capable of giving an opinion on the subject. By way of explaining his strange request, Mr. Playmore reverted to the notes which Benjamin had taken at Miserimus Dexter's house, and informed him of the serious importance of 'the gibberish' which he had reported under protest. The letter closed by recommending that any correspondence which ensued should be kept a secret from me—on the ground that it might excite false hopes in my mind if I was informed of it.

I now understood the tone which my worthy adviser had adopted in writing to me. His interest in the recovery of the

letter was evidently so overpowering that common prudence compelled him to conceal it from me, in case of ultimate failure. This did not look as if Mr. Playmore was likely to give up the investigation, on my withdrawal from it. I glanced again at the fragments of paper on Benjamin's table, with an interest in them which I had not felt yet.

‘Has anything been found at Gleninch?’ I asked.

‘No,’ said Benjamin. ‘I have only been trying experiments with a little note of my own, before I wrote to Mr. Playmore.’

‘Oh! you have torn up your little note yourself, then?’

‘Yes. And, to make it all the more difficult to put them together again, I shook up the pieces in a basket. It's a childish thing to do, my dear, at my age——’

He stopped, looking very much ashamed of himself.

‘Well,’ I went on; ‘and have you

succeeded in putting the pieces together again ?’

‘It’s not very easy, Valeria. But I have made a beginning. It’s the same principle as the principle in the “Puzzles” which we used to put together when I was a boy. Only get one central bit of it right, and the rest of the Puzzle falls into its place in a longer or a shorter time. Please don’t tell anybody, my dear. People might say I was in my dotage.’

People might have said that, who did not know Benjamin as I knew him. I remembered my old friend’s delight in guessing riddles in the columns of the cheap periodicals—and I perfectly understood the strong hold that the new ‘Puzzle’ had taken on his fancy. ‘It’s almost as interesting as solving Enigmas—isn’t it?’ I said, slyly.

‘Enigmas!’ Benjamin repeated, contemptuously. ‘It’s better than any Enigma I ever guessed yet. To think of that gibberish in my note-book having a meaning in it, after all! I only got Mr. Play-

more's letter this morning; and—I am really almost ashamed to mention it—I have been trying experiments, off and on, ever since. You won't tell upon me, will you?'

I answered the dear old man by a hearty embrace. Now that he had lost his steady moral balance, and had caught the infection of my enthusiasm, I loved him better than ever!

But I was not quite happy, though I tried to appear so. Struggle against it as I might, I felt a little mortified, when I remembered that I had resigned all further connection with the search for the letter at such a time as this. My one comfort was to think of Eustace. My one encouragement was to keep my mind fixed as constantly as possible on the bright change for the better that now appeared in the domestic prospect. Here, at least, there was no disaster to fear; here I could honestly feel that I had triumphed. My husband had come back to me of his own free will; he had not given way, under

the hard weight of evidence—he had yielded to the nobler influences of his gratitude and his love. And I had taken him to my heart again—not because I had made discoveries which left him no other alternative than to live with me, but because I believed in the better mind that had come to him, and loved and trusted him without reserve. Was it not worth some sacrifice to have arrived at this result! True—most true! And yet I was a little out of spirits. Ah, well! well! the remedy was within a day's journey. The sooner I was with Eustace the better.

Early the next morning, I left London for Paris, by the tidal-train. Benjamin accompanied me to the Terminus.

‘I shall write to Edinburgh by to-day's post,’ he said, in the interval before the train moved out of the station. ‘I think I can find the man Mr. Playmore wants to help him, if he decides to go on. Have you any message to send, Valeria?’

‘No. I have done with it, Benjamin ; I have nothing more to say.’

‘Shall I write and tell you how it ends, if Mr. Playmore does really try the experiment at Gleninch ?’

I answered, as I felt, a little bitterly.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Write and tell me, if the experiment fails.’

My old friend smiled. He knew me better than I knew myself.

‘All right !’ he said, resignedly. ‘I have got the address of your banker’s correspondent in Paris. You will have to go there for money, my dear ; and you *may* find a letter waiting for you in the office, when you least expect it. Let me hear how your husband goes on. Good-bye—and God bless you !’

That evening, I was restored to Eustace.

He was too weak, poor fellow, even to raise his head from the pillow. I knelt down at the bedside and kissed him. His languid, weary eyes kindled with a new life, as my lips touched his. ‘I must try

to live now,' he whispered, 'for your sake.'

My mother-in-law had delicately left us together. When he said those words, the temptation to tell him of the new hope that had come to brighten our lives was more than I could resist.

'You must try to live now, Eustace,' I said, 'for some one else, besides me.'

His eyes looked wonderingly into mine.

'Do you mean my mother?' he asked.

I laid my head on his bosom, and whispered back,

'I mean your child.'

I had all my reward for all that I had given up! I forgot Mr. Playmore; I forgot Gleninch. Our new honeymoon dates, in my remembrance, from that day.

The quiet time passed, in the bye street in which we lived. The outer stir and tumult of Parisian life ran its daily course around us, unnoticed and unheard. Steadily, though slowly, Eustace gained strength. The doctors, with a word or

two of caution, left him almost entirely to me. 'You are his physician,' they said; 'the happier you make him, the sooner he will recover.' The quiet, monotonous round of my new life was far from wearying me. I, too, wanted repose—I had no interests, no pleasures, out of my husband's room.

Once, and once only, the placid surface of our lives was just gently ruffled by an allusion to the past. Something that I accidentally said, reminded Eustace of our last interview at Major Fitz-David's house. He referred, very delicately, to what I had then said of the Verdict pronounced on him at the Trial; and he left me to infer that a word from my lips, confirming what his mother had already told him, would quiet his mind at once and for ever.

My answer involved no embarrassments or difficulties: I could, and did, honestly tell him that I had made his wishes my law. But it was hardly in womanhood, I am afraid, to be satisfied with merely replying, and to leave it there. I thought it due to me that Eus-

tace too should concede something, in the way of an assurance which might quiet *my* mind. As usual with me, the words followed the impulse to speak them. 'Eustace,' I asked, 'are you quite cured of those cruel doubts which once made you leave me?'

His answer (as he afterwards said) made me blush with pleasure. 'Ah, Valeria, I should never have gone away, if I had known you then as well as I know you now!'

So the last shadows of distrust melted away out of our lives.

The very remembrance of the turmoil and the trouble of my past days in London seemed now to fade from my memory. We were lovers again ; we were absorbed again in each other ; we could almost fancy that our marriage dated back once more to only a day or two since. But one last victory over myself was wanting to make my happiness complete. I still felt secret longings, in those dangerous moments when I was left to myself, to know whether the

search for the torn letter had, or had not, taken place. What wayward creatures we are ! With everything that a woman could want to make her happy, I was ready to put that happiness in peril, rather than remain ignorant of what was going on at Gleninch ! I actually hailed the day, when my empty purse gave me an excuse for going to my banker's correspondent on business, and so receiving any letters waiting for me which might be placed in my hands.

I applied for my money without knowing what I was about ; wondering all the time whether Benjamin had written to me or not. My eyes wandered over the desks and tables in the office, looking for letters furtively. Nothing of the sort was visible. But a man appeared from an inner office : an ugly man, who was yet beautiful to my eyes, for this sufficient reason—he had a letter in his hand, and he said, ‘ Is this for you, Ma’am ? ’

A glance at the address showed me Benjamin's handwriting.

Had they tried the experiment of recovering the letter? and had they failed?

Somebody put my money in my bag, and politely led me out to the little hired carriage which was waiting for me at the door. I remember nothing distinctly, until I looked at my news from Benjamin on my way home. His first words told me that the dust-heap had been examined, and that the fragments of the torn letter had been found!

CHAPTER XLV.

THE DUST-HEAP DISTURBED.

My head turned giddy. I was obliged to wait and let my overpowering agitation subside, before I could read any more.

Looking at the letter again, after an interval, my eyes fell accidentally on a sentence near the end, which surprised and startled me.

I stopped the driver of the carriage, at the entrance to the street in which our lodgings were situated, and told him to take me to the beautiful Park of Paris—the famous Bois de Boulogne. My object was to gain time enough, in this way, to read the letter carefully through by myself, and to ascertain whether I ought, or ought not, to keep the receipt of it a secret, before

I confronted my husband and his mother, at home.

This precaution taken, I read the narrative which my good Benjamin had so wisely and so thoughtfully written for me. Treating the various incidents methodically, he began with the Report which had arrived, in due course of mail, from our agent in America.

Our man had successfully traced the lodge-keeper's daughter and her husband to a small town in one of the Western States. Mr. Playmore's letter of introduction at once secured him a cordial reception from the married pair, and a patient hearing when he stated the object of his voyage across the Atlantic.

His first questions led to no very encouraging results. The woman was confused and surprised, and was apparently quite unable to exert her memory to any useful purpose. Fortunately, her husband proved to be a very intelligent man. He took the agent privately aside, and said to him : ' I understand my wife, and you don't.

Tell me exactly what it is you want to know, and leave it to me to discover how much she remembers, and how much she forgets.'

This sensible suggestion was readily accepted. The agent waited for events, a day and a night.

Early the next morning, the husband said to him : ' Talk to my wife now, and you will find she has something to tell you. Only mind this ! Don't laugh at her when she speaks of trifles. She is half ashamed to speak of trifles, even to me. Thinks men are above such matters, you know. Listen quietly, and let her talk—and you will get at it all in that way.'

The agent followed his instructions, and ' got at it ' as follows :—

The woman remembered, perfectly well, being sent to clean the bedrooms and put them tidy, after the gentlefolks had all left Gleninch. Her mother had a bad hip at the time, and could not go with her and help her. She did not much fancy being alone in the great house, after what had

happened in it. On her way to her work, she passed two of the cottagers' children in the neighbourhood, at play in the park. Mr. Macallan was always kind to his poor tenants, and never objected to the young ones round about having a run on the grass. The two children idly followed her to the house. She took them inside, along with her; not liking the place, as already mentioned, and feeling that they would be company in the solitary rooms.

She began her work in the Guests' Corridor—leaving the room in the other Corridor, in which the death had happened, to the last.

There was very little to do in the first two rooms. There was not litter enough, when she had swept the floors and cleaned the grates, to even half fill the housemaid's bucket which she carried with her. The children followed her about; and, all things considered, were 'very good company,' in the lonely place.

The third room (that is to say, the bedchamber which had been occupied by

Miserrimus Dexter) was in a much worse state than the other two, and wanted a great deal of tidying. She did not much notice the children here, being occupied with her work. The litter was swept up from the carpet, and the cinders and ashes were taken out of the grate, and the whole of it was in the bucket, when her attention was recalled to the children by hearing one of them cry.

She looked about the room without at first discovering them.

A fresh outburst of crying led her in the right direction, and showed her the children under a table in a corner of the room. The youngest of the two had got into a waste-paper basket. The eldest had found an old bottle of gum, with a brush fixed in the cork, and was gravely painting the face of the smaller child with what little remained of the contents of the bottle. Some natural struggles, on the part of the little creature, had ended in the overthrow of the basket, and the usual outburst of crying had followed as a matter of course.

In this state of things the remedy was soon applied. The woman took the bottle away from the eldest child, and gave it a 'box on the ear.' The younger one she set on its legs again, and she put the two 'in the corner' to keep them quiet. This done, she swept up such fragments of the torn paper in the basket as had fallen on the floor; threw them back again into the basket, along with the gum-bottle; fetched the bucket, and emptied the basket into it; and then proceeded to the fourth and last room in the Corridor, where she finished her work for that day.

Leaving the house, with the children after her, she took the filled bucket to the dust-heap, and emptied it in a hollow place among the rubbish, about halfway up the mound. Then she took the children home; and there was an end of it, for the day.

Such was the result of the appeal made to the woman's memory of domestic events at Gleninch.

The conclusion at which Mr. Playmore arrived, from the facts submitted to him,

was, that we might now hope to recover the letter. Thrown on the refuse ashes in the housemaid's bucket, and afterwards covered by the litter from the fourth room, the torn morsels would be protected above as well as below, when they were emptied on the dust-heap.

Succeeding weeks and months would add to that protection, by adding to the accumulated refuse. In the neglected condition of the grounds, the dust-heap had not been disturbed in search of manure. There it stood, untouched, from the time when the family left Gleninch, to the present day. And there, hidden deep somewhere in the mound, the fragments of the letter must be !

Such were the lawyer's conclusions. He had written immediately to communicate them to Benjamin. And, thereupon, what had Benjamin done ?

After having tried his powers of reconstruction on his own correspondence, the prospect of experimenting on the mysterious letter itself, had proved to be a

temptation too powerful for the old man to resist. 'I almost fancy, my dear, this business of yours has bewitched me,' he wrote. 'You see I have the misfortune to be an idle man. I have time to spare and money to spare. And the end of it is, that I am here at Gleninch, engaged on my own responsibility (with good Mr. Playmore's permission), in searching the dust-heap!'

Benjamin's description of his first view of the field of action at Gleninch followed these characteristic lines of apology.

I passed over the description, without ceremony. My remembrance of the scene was too vivid to require any prompting of that sort. I saw again, in the dim evening light, the unsightly mound which had so strangely attracted my attention at Gleninch. I heard again the words in which Mr. Playmore had explained to me the custom of the dust-heap in Scotch country-houses. What had Benjamin and Mr. Playmore done? What had Benjamin and Mr. Playmore found? For me, the true

interest of the narrative was there—and to that portion of it I eagerly turned next.

They had proceeded methodically, of course, with one eye on the pounds, shillings, and pence, and the other on the object in view. In Benjamin, the lawyer had found what he had not met with in me—a sympathetic mind, alive to the value of ‘an abstract of the expenses,’ and conscious of that most remunerative of human virtues, the virtue of economy.

At so much a week, they had engaged men to dig into the mound and to sift the ashes. At so much a week, they had hired a tent to shelter the open dust-heap from wind and weather. At so much a week, they had engaged the services of a young man (personally known to Benjamin), who was employed in a laboratory under a professor of chemistry, and who had distinguished himself by his skilful manipulation of paper in a recent case of forgery on a well-known London firm. Armed with these preparations, they had begun the work ; Benjamin and the young chemist

living at Gleninch, and taking it in turns to superintend the proceedings.

Three days of labour with the spade and the sieve produced no results of the slightest importance. However, the matter was in the hands of two quietly-determined men. They declined to be discouraged. They went on.

On the fourth day, the first morsels of paper were found.

Upon examination, they proved to be the fragments of a tradesman's prospectus. Nothing dismayed, Benjamin and the young chemist still persevered. At the end of the day's work, more pieces of paper were turned up. These proved to be covered with written characters. Mr. Playmore (arriving at Gleninch, as usual, every evening on the conclusion of his labours in the law) was consulted as to the handwriting. After careful examination, he declared that the mutilated portions of sentences submitted to him had been written, beyond all doubt, by Eustace Macallan's first wife!

This discovery roused the enthusiasm of the searchers to fever height.

Spades and sieves were from that moment forbidden utensils. However unpleasant the task might be, hands alone were used in the further examination of the mound. The first and foremost necessity was to place the morsels of paper (in flat cardboard boxes prepared for the purpose), in their order as they were found. Night came ; the labourers were dismissed ; Benjamin and his two colleagues worked on by lamplight. The morsels of paper were turned up by dozens, instead of by ones and twos. For awhile the search prospered in this way ; and then the morsels appeared no more. Had they all been recovered ? or would renewed hand-digging yield more yet ? The next light layers of rubbish were carefully removed—and the grand discovery of the day followed. There (upside down) was the gum-bottle, which the lodge-keeper's daughter had spoken of ! And, more precious still, under it, were more fragments of written paper, all

stuck together in a little lump, by the last drippings from the gum-bottle dropping upon them as they lay in the dust-heap!

The scene now shifted to the interior of the house. When the searchers next assembled, they met at the great table in the library at Gleninch.

Benjamin's experience with the 'Puzzles' which he had put together in the days of his boyhood proved to be of some use to his companions. The fragments accidentally stuck together, would, in all probability, be found to fit each other, and would certainly (in any case) be the easiest fragments to reconstruct, as a centre to start from.

The delicate business of separating these pieces of paper, and of preserving them in the order in which they had adhered to each other, was assigned to the practised fingers of the chemist. But the difficulties of his task did not end here. The writing was (as usual in letters) traced on both sides of the paper, and it could only be preserved for the purpose of

reconstruction by splitting each morsel into two—so as artificially to make a blank side, on which could be spread the fine cement used for reuniting the fragments in their original form.

To Mr. Playmore and Benjamin, the prospect of successfully putting the letter together, under these disadvantages, seemed to be almost hopeless. Their skilled colleague soon satisfied them that they were wrong.

He drew their attention to the thickness of the paper—note-paper of the strongest and best quality—on which the writing was traced. It was of more than twice the substance of the last paper on which he had operated, when he was engaged in the forgery case ; and it was, on that account, comparatively easy for him (aided by the mechanical appliances which he had brought from London) to split the morsels of the torn paper, within a given space of time which might permit them to begin the reconstruction of the letter that night.

With these explanations, he quietly devoted himself to his work. While Benjamin and the lawyer were still poring over the scattered morsels of the letter which had been first discovered, and trying to piece them together again, the chemist had divided the greater part of the fragments specially confided to him into two halves each; and had correctly put together some five or six sentences of the letter, on the smooth sheet of cardboard prepared for that purpose.

They looked eagerly at the reconstructed writing, so far.

It was correctly done: the sense was perfect. The first result gained by examination was remarkable enough to reward them for all their exertions. The language used, plainly identified the person to whom the late Mrs. Eustace had addressed her letter.

That person was—my husband.

And the letter thus addressed—if the plainest circumstantial evidence could be trusted—was identical with the letter which

Miserrimus Dexter had suppressed until the Trial was over, and had then destroyed by tearing it up.

These were the discoveries that had been made, at the time when Benjamin wrote to me. He had been on the point of posting his letter, when Mr. Playmore had suggested that he should keep it by him for a few days longer, on the chance of having more still to tell me.

‘We are indebted to her for these results,’ the lawyer had said. ‘But for her resolution, and her influence over Miserrimus Dexter, we should never have discovered what the dust-heap was hiding from us—we should never have seen so much as a glimmering of the truth. She has the first claim to the fullest information. Let her have it.’

The letter had been accordingly kept back for three days. That interval being at an end, it was hurriedly resumed and concluded in terms which indescribably alarmed me.

‘The chemist is advancing rapidly

with his part of the work' (Benjamin wrote); 'and I have succeeded in putting together a separate portion of the torn writing which makes sense. Comparison of what he has accomplished with what I have accomplished has led to startling conclusions. Unless Mr. Playmore and I are entirely wrong (and God grant we may be so!) there is a serious necessity for your keeping the reconstruction of the letter strictly secret from everybody about you. The disclosures suggested by what has come to light are so heart-rending and so dreadful, that I cannot bring myself to write about them, until I am absolutely obliged to do so. Please forgive me for disturbing you with this news. We are bound, sooner or later, to consult with you in the matter; and we think it right to prepare your mind for what may be to come.'

To this there was added a postscript in Mr. Playmore's handwriting.

'Pray observe strictly the caution which Mr. Benjamin impresses on you. And

bear this in mind, as a warning from *me*. If we succeed in reconstructing the entire letter, the last person living who ought (in my opinion) to be allowed to see it, is—your husband.'

I read those startling words; and I asked myself what I was to do next.

As matters now stood, my husband's tranquillity was, so to speak, committed to my charge. It was surely due to *him* that I should not receive Benjamin's letter and Mr. Playmore's postscript in silence. At the same time, it was due to myself that I should honestly tell Eustace I was in correspondence with Gleninch — only waiting to speak, until I knew more than I knew now.

Thus I reasoned with myself. And, to this day, I am not quite sure whether I was right or wrong.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE CRISIS DEFERRED.

‘TAKE care, Valeria!’ said Mrs. Macallan. ‘I ask you no questions; I only caution you, for your own sake. Eustace has noticed, what I have noticed—Eustace has seen a change in you. Take care!’

So my mother-in-law spoke to me, later in the day, when we happened to be alone. I had done my best to conceal all traces of the effect produced on me by the strange and terrible news from Gleninch. But who could read what I had read, who could feel what I now felt, and still maintain an undisturbed serenity of look and manner? If I had been the vilest hypocrite living, I doubt, even then, if my face could

have kept my secret, while my mind was full of Benjamin's letter.

Having spoken her word of caution, Mrs. Macallan made no further advance to me. I dare say she was right. Still, it seemed hard to be left, without a word of advice or of sympathy, to decide for myself what it was my duty to my husband to do next.

To show him Benjamin's narrative, in his state of health, and in the face of the warning addressed to me, was simply out of the question. At the same time, it was equally impossible, after I had already betrayed myself, to keep him entirely in the dark. I thought over it anxiously in the night. When the morning came, I decided to appeal to my husband's confidence in me.

I went straight to the point in these terms :—

‘Eustace, your mother said yesterday that you noticed a change in me, when I came back from my drive. Is she right?’

‘Quite right, Valeria,’ he answered—

speaking in lower tones than usual, and not looking at me.

‘We have no concealments from each other, now,’ I answered. ‘I ought to tell you, and I do tell you, that I found a letter from England waiting at the banker’s, which has caused me some agitation and alarm. Will you leave it to me to choose my own time for speaking more plainly? And will you believe, love, that I am really doing my duty towards you, as a good wife, in making this request?’

I paused. He made no answer: I could see that he was secretly struggling with himself. Had I ventured too far? Had I over-estimated the strength of my influence? My heart beat fast, my voice faltered—but I summoned courage enough to take his hand, and to make a last appeal to him. ‘Eustace!’ I said. ‘Don’t you know me, yet, well enough to trust me?’

He turned towards me for the first time. I saw a last vanishing trace of doubt in his eyes as they looked into mine.

‘You promise, sooner or later, to tell me the whole truth?’ he said.

‘I promise with all my heart!’

‘I trust you, Valeria!’

His brightening eyes told me that he really meant what he said. We sealed our compact with a kiss. Pardon me for mentioning these trifles—I am still writing (if you will kindly remember it) of our new honeymoon.

By that day’s post I answered Benjamin’s letter, telling him what I had done, and entreating him, if he and Mr. Playmore approved of my conduct, to keep me informed of any future discoveries which they might make at Gleninch.

After an interval—an endless interval, as it seemed to me—of ten days more, I received a second letter from my old friend; with another postscript added by Mr. Playmore.

‘We are advancing steadily and successfully with the putting together of the

letter,' Benjamin wrote. 'The one new discovery which we have made is of serious importance to your husband. We have reconstructed certain sentences, declaring, in the plainest words, that the arsenic which Eustace procured was purchased at the request of his wife, and was in her possession at Gleninch. This, remember, is in the handwriting of the wife, and is signed by the wife—as we have also found out. Unfortunately, I am obliged to add, that the objection to taking your husband into our confidence, mentioned when I last wrote, still remains in force—in greater force, I may say, than ever. The more we make out of the letter, the more inclined we are (if we only studied our own feelings) to throw it back into the dust-heap, in mercy to the memory of the unhappy writer. I shall keep this open for a day or two. If there is more news to tell you, by that time, you will hear of it from Mr. Playmore.'

Mr. Playmore's postscript followed, dated three days later.

'The concluding part of the late Mrs.

Macallan's letter to her husband,' the lawyer wrote, 'has proved accidentally to be the first part which we have succeeded in piecing together. With the exception of a few gaps still left, here and there, the writing of the closing paragraphs has been perfectly reconstructed. I have neither the time nor the inclination to write to you on this sad subject, in any detail. In a fortnight more, at the longest, we shall, I hope, send you a copy of the letter, complete from the first line to the last. Meanwhile, it is my duty to tell you that there is one bright side to this otherwise deplorable and shocking document. Legally speaking, as well as morally speaking, it absolutely vindicates your husband's innocence. And it may be lawfully used for this purpose—if he can reconcile it to his conscience, and to the mercy due to the memory of the dead, to permit the public exposure of the letter in Court. Understand me, he cannot be tried again on what we call the criminal charge—for certain technical reasons with which I need not trouble you. But, if the

facts which were involved at the criminal trial, can also be shown to be involved in a civil case (and, in this case, they can), the entire matter may be made the subject of a new legal enquiry ; and the verdict of a second jury, completely vindicating your husband, may be thus obtained. Keep this information to yourself for the present. Preserve the position which you have so sensibly adopted towards Eustace, until you have read the restored letter. When you have done this, my own idea is that you will shrink, in pity to *him*, from letting him see it. How he is to be kept in ignorance of what we have discovered is another question, the discussion of which must be deferred until we can consult together. Until that time comes, I can only repeat my advice,—Wait till the next news reaches you from Gleninch.'

I waited. What I suffered, what Eustace thought of me, does not matter. Nothing matters now but the facts.

In less than a fortnight more, the task of restoring the letter was completed. Ex-

cepting certain instances, in which the morsels of the torn paper had been irretrievably lost—and in which it had been necessary to complete the sense, in harmony with the writer's intention—the whole letter had been put together ; and the promised copy of it was forwarded to me in Paris.

Before you, too, read that dreadful letter, do me one favour. Let me briefly remind you of the circumstances under which Eustace Macallan married his first wife.

Remember that the poor creature fell in love with him, without awakening any corresponding affection on his side. Remember that he separated himself from her, and did all he could to avoid her, when he found this out. Remember that she presented herself at his residence in London, without a word of warning ; that he did his best to save her reputation ; that he failed, through no fault of his own ; and that he ended, rashly ended in a moment of despair, by marrying her, to silence the scandal that

must otherwise have blighted her life as a woman for the rest of her days. Bear all this in mind (it is the sworn testimony of respectable witnesses); and pray do not forget—however foolishly and blameably he may have written about her in the secret pages of his Diary—that he was proved to have done his best to conceal from his wife the aversion which the poor soul inspired in him; and that he was (in the opinion of those who could best judge him) at least a courteous and a considerate husband, if he could be no more.

And now take the letter. It asks but one favour of you; it asks to be read by the light of Christ's teaching: 'Judge not, that ye be not judged.'

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE WIFE'S CONFESSION.

‘ Gleninch, October 19, 18—.

‘ MY HUSBAND :—

‘ I HAVE something very painful to tell you, about one of your oldest friends.

‘ You have never encouraged me to come to you with any confidences of mine. If you had allowed me to be as familiar with you as some wives are with their husbands, I should have spoken to you personally, instead of writing. As it is, I don't know how you might receive what I have to say to you, if I said it by word of mouth. So I write.

‘ The man against whom I warn you is still a guest in this house—Miserrimus Dexter. No falser or wickedder creature walks the earth. Don't throw my letter

aside! I have waited to say this until I could find proof that might satisfy you. I have got the proof.

‘ You may remember that I ventured to express some disapproval, when you first told me you had asked this man to visit us. If you had allowed me time to explain myself, I might have been bold enough to give you a good reason for the aversion I felt towards your friend. But you would not wait. You hastily (and most unjustly) accused me of feeling prejudiced against the miserable creature on account of his deformity. No other feeling than compassion for deformed persons has ever entered my mind. I have indeed almost a fellow-feeling for them ; being that next worst thing myself to a deformity—a plain woman. I objected to Mr. Dexter as your guest, because he had asked me to be his wife in past days, and because I had reason to fear that he still regarded me (after my marriage) with a guilty and a horrible love. Was it not my duty, as a good wife, to object to his being your guest at Gleninch ?

And was it not your duty, as a good husband, to encourage me to say more ?

‘ Well ! Mr. Dexter has been your guest for many weeks ; and Mr. Dexter has dared to speak to me again of his love. He has insulted me, and insulted you, by declaring that *he* adores me, and that *you* hate me. He has promised me a life of unalloyed happiness, in a foreign country with my lover. And he has prophesied for me a life of unendurable misery, at home with my husband.

‘ Why did I not make my complaint to you, and have this monster dismissed from the house at once and for ever ?

‘ Are you sure you would have believed me, if I had complained, and if your bosom friend had denied all intention of insulting me ? I heard you once say (when you were not aware that I was within hearing) that the vainest women were always the ugly women. You might have accused *me* of vanity. Who knows ?

‘ But I have no desire to shelter myself under this excuse. I am a jealous, unhappy

creature ; always doubtful of your affection for me ; always fearing that another woman has got my place in your heart. Miserrimus Dexter has practised on this weakness of mine. He has declared he can prove to me (if I will permit him) that I am, in your secret heart, an object of loathing to you ; that you shrink from touching me ; that you curse the hour when you were foolish enough to make me your wife. I have struggled as long as I could against the temptation to let him produce his proofs. It was a terrible temptation, to a woman who was far from feeling sure of the sincerity of your love for her ; and it has ended in getting the better of my resistance. I wickedly concealed the disgust which the wretch inspired in me ; I wickedly gave him leave to explain himself ; I wickedly permitted this enemy of yours and of mine to take me into his confidence. And why ? Because I loved you and you only ; and because Miserrimus Dexter's proposal did, after all, echo a doubt of you that had long been gnawing secretly at my heart.

‘Forgive me, Eustace! This is my first sin against you. It shall be my last.

‘I will not spare myself; I will write a full confession of what I said to him and of what he said to me. You may make me suffer for it, when you know what I have done; but you will at least be warned in time; you will see your false friend in his true light.

‘I said to him: “How can you prove to me that my husband hates me in secret?”

‘He answered: “I can prove it, under his own handwriting; you shall see it in his Diary.”

‘I said: “His Diary has a lock; and the drawer in which he keeps it has a lock. How can you get at the Diary and the drawer?”

‘He answered: “I have my own way of getting at both of them, without the slightest risk of being discovered by your husband. All you have to do is to give me the opportunity of seeing you privately. I will engage, in return, to bring the open Diary with me to your room.”

‘ I said : “ How can I give you the opportunity ? What do you mean ? ”

‘ He pointed to the key, in the door of communication between my room and the little study.

‘ He said : “ With my infirmity, I may not be able to profit by the next opportunity of visiting you here, unobserved : I must be able to choose my own time and my own way of getting to you secretly. Let me take the key ; leaving the door locked. When the key is missed, if *you* say it doesn't matter—if *you* point out that the door is locked, and tell the servants not to trouble themselves about finding the key—there will be no disturbance in the house ; and I shall be in secure possession of a means of communication with you which no one will suspect. Will you do this ? ”

‘ I have done it.

‘ Yes ! I have become the accomplice of this double-faced villain. I have degraded myself, and outraged you, by making an appointment to pry into your Diary. I know how base my conduct is. I can make

no excuse. I can only repeat that I love you, and that I am sorely afraid you don't love me. And Miserrimus Dexter offers to end my doubts by showing me the most secret thoughts of your heart, in your own writing.

‘He is to be here, after many delays (while you are out), some time in the course of the next two hours. I shall decline to be satisfied with only once looking at your Diary; and I shall make an appointment with him to bring it to me again, at the same time to-morrow. Before then, you will receive these lines, by the hand of my nurse. Go out as usual, after reading them. But return privately, and unlock the table drawer in which you keep your book. You will find it gone. Post yourself quietly in the little study; and you will discover the Diary (when Miserrimus Dexter leaves me), in the hands of your friend.¹

¹ Note by Mr. Playmore :—The greatest difficulties of reconstruction occurred in this first portion of the torn letter. In the fourth paragraph from the beginning, we have been obliged to supply lost words in no less than

‘October 20.

‘I have read your Diary.

‘At last I know what you really think of me. I have read what Miserrimus Dexter promised I should read—the confession of your loathing for me, in your own handwriting.

‘You will not receive what I wrote to you yesterday, at the time, or in the manner, which I had proposed. Long as my letter is, I have still (after reading your Diary) some more words to add. After I have closed and sealed the envelope, and addressed it to you, I shall put it under my pillow. It will be found there when I am laid out for the grave—and then, Eustace (when it is too late for hope or help), my letter will be given to you.

three places. In the ninth, tenth, and seventeenth paragraphs the same proceeding was, in a greater or less degree, found to be necessary. In all these cases, the utmost pains have been taken to supply the deficiency in exact accordance with what appeared to be the meaning of the writer, as indicated in the existing pieces of the manuscript.

‘ Yes : I have had enough of my life.
Yes : I mean to die.

‘ I have already sacrificed everything but my life to my love for you. Now I know that my love is not returned, the last sacrifice left is easy. My death will set you free to marry Mrs. Beauly.

‘ You don't know what it cost me to control my hatred of her, and to beg her to pay her visit here, without minding my illness. I could never have done it if I had not been so fond of you, and so fearful of irritating you against me by showing my jealousy. And how did you reward me? Let your Diary answer ! “ I tenderly embraced her, this very morning ; and I hope, poor soul, she did not discover the effort that it cost me.”

‘ Well ; I have discovered it now. I know that you privately think your life with me “ a purgatory.” I know that you have compassionately hidden from me the “ sense of shrinking that comes over you when you are obliged to submit to my caresses.” I am nothing but an obstacle—

an "utterly distasteful" obstacle—between you and the woman whom you love so dearly that you "adore the earth which she touches with her foot." Be it so! I will stand in your way no longer. It is no sacrifice and no merit on my part. Life is unendurable to me, now I know that the man whom I love with all my heart and soul, secretly shrinks from me whenever I touch him.

'I have got the means of death close at hand.

'The arsenic that I twice asked you to buy for me is in my dressing-case. I deceived you when I mentioned some common-place reasons for wanting it. My true reason was to try if I could not improve my ugly complexion—not from any vain feeling of mine: only to make myself look better and more lovable in your eyes. I have taken some of it for that purpose; but I have got plenty left to kill myself with. The poison will have its use at last. It might have failed to improve my com-

plexion. It will not fail to relieve you of your ugly wife.

‘Don’t let me be examined after death. Show this letter to the doctor who attends me. It will tell him that I have committed suicide ; it will prevent any innocent person from being suspected of poisoning me. I want nobody to be blamed or punished. I shall remove the chemist’s label, and carefully empty the bottle containing the poison, so that he may not suffer on my account.

‘I must wait here, and rest a little while—then take up my letter again. It is far too long already. But these are my farewell words. I may surely dwell a little on my last talk with you !

‘October 21. Two o’clock in the morning.

‘I sent you out of the room yesterday, when you came in to ask how I had passed the night. And I spoke of you shamefully, Eustace, after you had gone, to the hired nurse who attends on me. Forgive me. I

am almost beside myself now. You know why.

‘ Half-past three.

‘ Oh, my husband, I have done the deed which will relieve you of the wife whom you hate ! I have taken the poison—all of it that was left in the paper packet, which was the first that I found. If this is not enough to kill me, I have more left in the bottle.

‘ Ten minutes past five.

‘ You have just gone, after giving me my composing draught. My courage failed me at the sight of you. I thought to myself, “ If he looks at me kindly, I will confess what I have done, and let him save my life.” You never looked at me at all. You only looked at the medicine. I let you go, without saying a word.

‘ Half-past five.

‘ I begin to feel the first effects of the poison. The nurse is asleep at the foot of

my bed. I won't call for assistance ; I won't wake her. I will die.

‘ Half-past nine.

‘ The agony was beyond my endurance—I woke the nurse. I have seen the doctor.

‘ Nobody suspects anything. Strange to say, the pain has left me ; I have evidently taken too little of the poison. I must open the bottle which contains the larger quantity. Fortunately, you are not near me—my resolution to die, or rather, my loathing of life, remains as bitterly unaltered as ever. To make sure of my courage, I have forbidden the nurse to send for you. She has just gone downstairs by my orders. I am free to get the poison out of my dressing-case.

‘ Ten minutes to ten.

‘ I had just time to hide the bottle (after the nurse had left me), when you came into my room.

‘ I had another moment of weakness

when I saw you. I determined to give myself a last chance of life. That is to say, I determined to offer you a last opportunity of treating me kindly. I asked you to get me a cup of tea. If, in paying me this little attention, you only encouraged me by one fond word or one fond look, I resolved not to take the second dose of poison.

‘ You obeyed my wishes ; but you were not kind. You gave me my tea, Eustace, as if you were giving a drink to your dog. And then you wondered in a languid way (thinking, I suppose, of Mrs. Beaulieu all the time), at my dropping the cup in handing it back to you. I really could not help it ; my hand *would* tremble. In my place, your hand might have trembled, too—with the arsenic under the bedclothes. You politely hoped, before you went away, that the tea would do me good—and, oh God ! you could not even look at me when you said that ! You looked at the broken bits of the tea-cup.

‘ The instant you were out of the room I took the poison—a double dose this time.

‘I have a little request to make here, while I think of it.

‘After removing the label from the bottle, and putting it back, clean, in my dressing-case, it struck me that I had failed to take the same precaution (in the early morning) with the empty paper-packet, bearing on it the name of the other chemist. I threw it aside on the counterpane of the bed, among some other loose papers. My ill-tempered nurse complained of the litter, and crumpled them all up, and put them away somewhere. I hope the chemist will not suffer through my carelessness. Pray bear it in mind to say that he is not to blame.

‘Dexter—something reminds me of Miserrimus Dexter. He has put your Diary back again in the drawer, and he presses me for an answer to his proposals. Has this false wretch any conscience? If he has, even *he* will suffer—when my death answers him.

‘The nurse has been in my room again.

I have sent her away. I have told her I want to be alone.

‘How is the time going? I cannot find my watch. Is the pain coming back again, and paralysing me? I don’t feel it keenly yet.

‘It may come back, though, at any moment. I have still to close my letter, and to address it to you. And, besides, I must save up my strength to hide it under the pillow, so that nobody may find it until after my death.

‘Farewell, my dear. I wish I had been a prettier woman. A more loving woman (towards you) I could not be. Even now, I dread the sight of your dear face. Even now, if I allowed myself the luxury of looking at you, I don’t know that you might not charm me into confessing what I have done—before it is too late to save me.

‘But you are not here. Better as it is! better as it is!

‘Once more, farewell! Be happier than you have been with me. I love you, Eustace—I forgive you. When you have nothing

else to think about, think sometimes, as kindly as you can, of your poor, ugly

‘SARA MACALLAN.’¹

¹ Note by Mr. Playmore:—The lost words and phrases supplied in this concluding portion of the letter are so few in number that it is needless to mention them. The fragments which were found accidentally stuck together by the gum, and which represent the part of the letter first completely reconstructed, begin at the phrase, ‘I spoke of you shamefully, Eustace’; and end with the broken sentence, ‘If, in paying me this little attention, you only encouraged me by one fond word or one fond look, I resolved not to take ——’ With the assistance thus afforded to us, the labour of putting together the concluding half of the letter (dated ‘October 20’) was trifling, compared with the almost insurmountable difficulties which we encountered in dealing with the scattered wreck of the preceding pages.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

WHAT ELSE COULD I DO ?

AS SOON as I could dry my eyes and compose my spirits, after reading the wife's pitiable and dreadful farewell, my first thought was of Eustace—my first anxiety was to prevent him from ever reading what I had read.

Yes! to this end it had come. I had devoted my life to the attainment of one object ; and that object I had gained. There, on the table before me, lay the triumphant vindication of my husband's innocence ; and, in mercy to him, in mercy to the memory of his dead wife, my one hope was that he might never see it ! My one desire was to hide it from the public view !

I looked back at the strange circum-

stances under which the letter had been discovered.

It was all my doing--as the lawyer had said. And yet, what I had done, I had, so to speak, done blindfold. The merest accident might have altered the whole course of later events. I had over and over again interfered to check Ariel, when she entreated the Master to 'tell her a story.' If she had not succeeded, in spite of my opposition, Miserrimus Dexter's last effort of memory might never have been directed to the tragedy at Gleninch. And again, if I had only remembered to move my chair, and so to give Benjamin the signal to leave off, he would never have written down the apparently senseless words which have led us to the discovery of the truth.

Looking back at events in this frame of mind, the very sight of the letter sickened and horrified me. I cursed the day which had disinterred the fragments of it from their foul tomb. Just at the time when Eustace had found his weary way back to

health and strength ; just at the time when we were united again and happy again—when a month or two more might make us father and mother, as well as husband and wife—that frightful record of suffering and sin had risen against us like an avenging spirit. There it faced me on the table, threatening my husband's tranquillity ; nay, for all I knew (if he read it at the present critical stage of his recovery), even threatening his life !

The hour struck from the clock on the mantelpiece. It was Eustace's time for paying me his morning visit, in my own little room. He might come in at any moment ; he might see the letter ; he might snatch the letter out of my hand. In a frenzy of terror and loathing, I caught up the vile sheets of paper, and threw them into the fire.

It was a fortunate thing that a copy only had been sent to me. If the original letter had been in its place, I believe I should have burnt the original at that moment.

The last morsel of paper had been

barely consumed by the flames when the door opened, and Eustace came in.

He glanced at the fire. The black cinders of the burnt paper were still floating at the back of the grate. He had seen the letter brought to me at the breakfast-table. Did he suspect what I had done? He said nothing—he stood gravely looking into the fire. Then he advanced and fixed his eyes on me. I suppose I was very pale. The first words he spoke were words which asked me if I felt ill.

I was determined not to deceive him, even in the merest trifle.

‘I am feeling a little nervous, Eustace,’ I answered. ‘That is all!’

He looked at me again, as if he expected me to say something more. I remained silent. He took a letter out of the breast-pocket of his coat, and laid it on the table before me—just where the Confession had lain before I destroyed it!

‘I have had a letter, too, this morning,’ he said. ‘And *I*, Valeria, have no secrets from *you*.’

I understood the reproach which those words conveyed ; but I made no attempt to answer him.

‘ Do you wish me to read it ? ’ was all I said, pointing to the envelope which he had laid on the table.

‘ I have already said that I have no secrets from you,’ he repeated. ‘ The envelope is open. See for yourself what is enclosed in it.’

I took out—not a letter, but a printed paragraph, cut from a Scotch newspaper.

‘ Read it,’ said Eustace.

I read, as follows :—

‘ STRANGE DOINGS AT GLENINCH.—A romance in real life seems to be in course of progress at Mr. Macallan’s country-house. Private excavations are taking place—if our readers will pardon us the unsavoury allusion ?—at the dust-heap, of all places in the world ! Something has assuredly been discovered ; but nobody knows what. This alone is certain :—For weeks past, two strangers from London (superintended by our respected fellow-

citizen, Mr. Playmore) have been at work night and day in the library at Gleninch, with the door locked. Will the secret ever be revealed? And will it throw any light on a mysterious and shocking event, which our readers have learnt to associate with the past history of Gleninch? Perhaps, when Mr. Macallan returns, he may be able to answer these questions. In the meantime, we can only await events.'

I laid the newspaper slip on the table, in no very Christian frame of mind towards the persons concerned in producing it. Some reporter in search of news had evidently been prying about the grounds at Gleninch, and some busybody in the neighbourhood had in all probability sent the published paragraph to Eustace. Entirely at a loss what to do, I waited for my husband to speak. He did not keep me in suspense—he questioned me instantly.

'Do you understand what it means, Valeria?'

I answered honestly—I owned that I understood what it meant.

He waited again as if he expected me to say more. I still kept the only refuge left to me—the refuge of silence.

‘Am I to know no more than I know now?’ he proceeded, after an interval. ‘Are you not bound to tell me what is going on in my own house?’

It is a common remark that people, if they can think at all, think quickly in emergencies. There was but one way out of the embarrassing position in which my husband’s last words had placed me. My instincts showed me the way, I suppose. At any rate, I took it.

‘You have promised to trust me,’ I began.

He admitted that he had promised.

‘I must ask you, for your own sake, Eustace, to trust me for a little while longer. I will satisfy you, if you will only give me time.’

His face darkened. ‘How much longer must I wait?’ he asked.

I saw that the time had come for try-

ing some stronger form of persuasion than words.

‘Kiss me,’ I said, ‘before I tell you!’

He hesitated (so like a husband!). And I persisted (so like a wife!). There was no choice for him but to yield. Having given me my kiss (not over-graciously), he insisted once more on knowing how much longer I wanted him to wait.

‘I want you to wait,’ I answered, ‘until our child is born.’

He started. My condition took him by surprise. I gently pressed his hand, and gave him a look. He returned the look (warmly enough, this time, to satisfy me). ‘Say you consent,’ I whispered.

He consented.

So I put off the day of reckoning once more. So I gained time to consult with Benjamin and Mr. Playmore.

While Eustace remained with me in the room, I was composed, and capable of talking to him. But, when he left me, after a time, to think over what had passed

between us, and to remember how kindly he had given way to me, my heart turned pityingly to those other wives (better women, some of them, than I am), whose husbands, under similar circumstances, would have spoken hard words to them ; would perhaps even have acted more cruelly still. The contrast thus suggested between their fate and mine quite overcame me. What had I done to deserve my happiness ? What had *they* done, poor souls, to deserve their misery ? My nerves were overwrought, I dare say, after reading the dreadful confession of Eustace's first wife. I burst out crying—and I was all the better for it afterwards !

CHAPTER XLIX.

PAST AND FUTURE.

I WRITE from memory unassisted by notes or diaries ; and I have no distinct recollection of the length of our residence abroad. It certainly extended over a period of some months. Long after Eustace was strong enough to take the journey to London, the doctors persisted in keeping him in Paris. He had shown symptoms of weakness in one of his lungs, and his medical advisers, seeing that he prospered in the dry atmosphere of France, warned him to be careful of breathing too soon the moist air of his own country.

Thus it happened that we were still in Paris, when I received my next news from Gleninch.

This time, no letters passed on either side. To my surprise and delight, Benjamin quietly made his appearance, one morning, in our pretty French drawing-room. He was so preternaturally smart in his dress, and so incomprehensibly anxious (while my husband was in the way) to make us understand that his reasons for visiting Paris were holiday reasons only, that I at once suspected him of having crossed the Channel in a double character—say, as tourist in search of pleasure, when third persons were present: as ambassador from Mr. Playmore, when he and I had the room to ourselves.

Later in the day I contrived that we should be left together, and I soon found that my anticipations had not misled me. Benjamin had set out for Paris, at Mr. Playmore's express request, to consult with me as to the future, and to enlighten me as to the past. He presented me with his credentials, in the shape of a little note from the lawyer.

‘There are some few points’ (Mr.

Playmore wrote) 'which the recovery of the letter does not seem to clear up. I have done my best, with Mr. Benjamin's assistance, to find the right explanation of these debateable matters, and I have treated the subject, for the sake of brevity, in the form of Questions and Answers. Will you accept me as interpreter, after the mistakes I made when you consulted me in Edinburgh? Events, I admit, have proved that I was entirely wrong in trying to prevent you from returning to Dexter—and partially wrong in suspecting Dexter of being directly, instead of indirectly, answerable for the first Mrs. Eustace's death! I frankly make my confession, and leave you to tell Mr. Benjamin whether you think my new Catechism worthy of examination or not.'

I thought his 'new Catechism' (as he called it) decidedly worthy of examination. If you don't agree with this view, and if you are dying to be done with me and my narrative, pass on to the next chapter by all means!

Benjamin produced the Questions and Answers, and read them to me, at my request, in these terms :—

‘ Questions suggested by the letter discovered at Gleninch. First Group : Questions relating to the Diary. First Question :—In obtaining access to Mr. Macallan’s private journal, was Miserrimus Dexter guided by any previous knowledge of its contents ?

‘ Answer :—It is doubtful if he had any such knowledge. The probabilities are that he noticed how carefully Mr. Macallan secured his Diary from observation ; that he inferred therefrom the existence of dangerous domestic secrets in the locked-up pages ; and that he speculated on using those secrets for his own purpose, when he caused the false keys to be made.

‘ Second Question :—To what motive are we to attribute Miserrimus Dexter’s interference with the sheriff’s officers, on

the day when they seized Mr. Macallan's Diary, along with his other papers ?

‘ Answer :—In replying to this question, we must first do justice to Dexter himself. Infamously as we now know him to have acted, the man was not a down-right fiend. That he secretly hated Mr. Macallan, as his successful rival in the affections of the woman whom he loved—and that he did all he could to induce the unhappy lady to desert her husband—are, in this case, facts not to be denied. On the other hand, it is fairly to be doubted whether he was additionally capable of permitting the friend who trusted him to be tried for murder, through his fault, without making an effort to save the innocent man. It had naturally never occurred to Mr. Macallan (being guiltless of his wife's death) to destroy his Diary and his letters, in the fear that they might be used against him. Until the prompt and secret action of the Fiscal took him by surprise, the idea of his being charged

with the murder of his wife was an idea which we know, from his own statement, had never even entered his mind. But Dexter must have looked at the matter from another point of view. In his last wandering words (spoken when his mind broke down) he refers to the Diary in these terms, "The Diary will hang him ; I won't have him hanged." If he could have found his opportunity of getting at it in time—or if the sheriff's officers had not been too quick for him—there can be no reasonable doubt that Dexter would have himself destroyed the Diary, foreseeing the consequences of its production in Court. So strongly does he appear to have felt these considerations, that he even resisted the officers in the execution of their duty. His agitation, when he sent for Mr. Playmore to interfere, was witnessed by that gentleman, and (it may not be amiss to add) was genuine agitation beyond dispute.

‘Questions of the Second Group : relating to the Wife's Confession. First

Question :—What prevented Dexter from destroying the letter, when he first discovered it under the dead woman's pillow ?

Answer :—The same motives which led him to resist the seizure of the Diary, and to give his evidence in the prisoner's favour at the Trial, induced him to preserve the letter, until the verdict was known. Looking back once more at his last words (as taken down by Mr. Benjamin), we may infer that if the verdict had been Guilty, he would not have hesitated to save the innocent husband by producing the wife's confession. There are degrees in all wickedness. Dexter was wicked enough to suppress the letter, which wounded his vanity by revealing him as an object for loathing and contempt—but he was not wicked enough deliberately to let an innocent man perish on the scaffold. He was capable of exposing the rival whom he hated to the infamy and torture of a public accusation of murder ; but, in the event of an adverse verdict, he shrank before the direr cruelty of

letting him be hanged. Reflect, in this connection, on what he must have suffered, villain as he was, when he first read the wife's confession. He had calculated on undermining her affection for her husband—and whither had his calculations led him? He had driven the woman whom he loved to the last dreadful refuge of death by suicide! Give these considerations their due weight; and you will understand that some little redeeming virtue might show itself, as the result even of *this* man's remorse.

‘Second Question :—What motive influenced Miserrimus Dexter's conduct, when Mrs. (Valeria) Macallan informed him that she proposed reopening the enquiry into the poisoning at Gleninch?’

‘Answer :—In all probability, Dexter's guilty fears suggested to him that he might have been watched, on the morning when he secretly entered the chamber in which the first Mrs. Eustace lay dead. Feeling no scruples himself, to restrain him from listening at doors and looking through

keyholes, he would be all the more ready to suspect other people of the same practices. With this dread in him, it would naturally occur to his mind that Mrs. Valeria might meet with the person who had watched him, and might hear all that the person had discovered—unless he led her astray at the outset of her investigations. Her own jealous suspicions of Mrs. Beauly offered him the chance of easily doing this. And he was all the readier to profit by the chance, being himself animated by the most hostile feeling towards that lady. He knew her, as the enemy who destroyed the domestic peace of the mistress of the house : he loved the mistress of the house—and he hated her enemy, accordingly. The preservation of his guilty secret, and the persecution of Mrs. Beauly : there you have the greater and the lesser motive of his conduct, in his relations with Mrs. Eustace the second !' ¹

¹ Note by the writer of the narrative :—Look back for a further illustration of this point of view to the scene at Benjamin's house (Chapter XXXV.), where Dexter, in a

Benjamin laid down his notes, and took off his spectacles.

‘We have not thought it necessary to go further than this,’ he said. ‘Is there any point you can think of that is still left unexplained?’

I reflected. There was no point of any importance left unexplained that I could remember. But there was one little matter (suggested by the recent allusions to Mrs. Beaulieu) which I wished, if possible, to have thoroughly cleared up.

‘Have you and Mr. Playmore ever spoken together on the subject of my husband’s former attachment to Mrs. Beaulieu?’ I asked. ‘Has Mr. Playmore ever told you why Eustace did not marry her, after the Trial?’

‘I put that question to Mr. Playmore myself,’ said Benjamin. ‘He answered it easily enough. Being your husband’s confidential friend and adviser, he was consulted when Mr. Eustace wrote to Mrs.

moment of ungovernable agitation, betrays his secret (or, rather, a part of his secret) to Valeria.

Beaully, after the Trial; and he repeated the substance of the letter, at my request. Would you like to hear what I remember of it, in my turn ? ’

I owned that I should like to hear it. What Benjamin thereupon told me, exactly coincided with what Miserrimus Dexter had told me—as related in the thirtieth chapter of my narrative. Mrs. Beaully had been a witness of the public degradation of my husband. That was enough in itself to prevent him from marrying her. He broke off with *her*, for the same reason which had led him to separate himself from *me*. Existence with a woman who knew that he had been tried for his life as a murderer, was an existence which he had not resolution enough to face. The two accounts agreed in every particular. At last my jealous curiosity was pacified ; and Benjamin was free to dismiss the past from further consideration, and to approach the more critical and more interesting topic of the future.

His first enquiries related to Eustace. He asked if my husband had any suspicion

of the proceedings which had taken place at Gleninch.

I told him what had happened, and how I had contrived to put off the inevitable disclosure for a time.

My old friend's face cleared up as he listened to me.

‘This will be good news for Mr. Playmore,’ he said. ‘Our excellent friend, the lawyer, is sorely afraid that our discoveries may compromise your position with your husband. On the one hand, he is naturally anxious to spare Mr. Eustace the distress which he must certainly feel, if he reads his first wife's confession. On the other hand, it is impossible, in justice (as Mr. Playmore puts it) to the unborn children of your marriage, to suppress a document which vindicates the memory of their father from the aspersion that the Scotch Verdict might otherwise cast on it.’

I listened attentively. In referring to our future, Benjamin had touched on a trouble which had been long secretly preying on my mind.

‘How does Mr. Playmore propose to meet the difficulty?’ I asked.

‘He can only meet it in one way,’ Benjamin replied. ‘He proposes to seal up the original manuscript of the letter, and to add to it a plain statement of the circumstances under which it was discovered; supported by your signed attestation and mine, as witnesses to the facts. This done, he must leave it to you to take your husband into your confidence, at your own time. It will then be for Mr. Eustace to decide whether he will open the enclosure—or whether he will leave it, with the seal unbroken, as an heirloom to his children, to be made public or not, at their discretion, when they are of an age to think for themselves. Do you consent to this, my dear? or would you prefer that Mr. Playmore should see your husband, and act for you in the matter?’

I decided, without hesitation, to take the responsibility on myself. Where the question of guiding Eustace’s decision was concerned, I considered my influence to

be decidedly superior to the influence of Mr. Playmore. My choice met with Benjamin's full approval. He arranged to write to Edinburgh, and relieve the lawyer's anxieties by that day's post.

The one last thing now left to be settled, related to our plans for returning to England. The doctors were the authorities on this subject. I promised to consult them about it, at their next visit to Eustace.

‘Have you anything more to say to me?’ Benjamin enquired, as he opened his writing-case.

I thought of Miserrimus Dexter and Ariel; and I enquired if he had heard any news of them lately. My old friend sighed, and warned me that I had touched on a painful subject.

‘The best thing that can happen to that unhappy man, is likely to happen,’ he said. ‘The one change in him is a change that threatens paralysis. You may hear of his death before you get back to England.’

‘ And Ariel ? ’ I asked.

‘ Quite unaltered,’ Benjamin answered.
‘ Perfectly happy so long as she is with
“ the Master.” From all I can hear of her,
poor soul, she doesn’t reckon Dexter among
mortal beings. She laughs at the idea of
his dying ; and she waits patiently, in the
firm persuasion that he will recognise her
again.’

Benjamin’s news saddened and silenced
me. I left him to his letter.

CHAPTER L.

THE LAST OF THE STORY.

IN ten days more we returned to England, accompanied by Benjamin.

Mrs. Macallan's house in London offered us ample accommodation. We gladly availed ourselves of her proposal, when she invited us to stay with her until our child was born, and our plans for the future were arranged.

The sad news from the asylum (for which Benjamin had prepared my mind at Paris) reached me soon after our return to England. Miserrimus Dexter's release from the burden of life had come to him, by slow degrees. A few hours before he breathed his last, he rallied for a while, and recognised Ariel at his bedside. He feebly

pronounced her name, and looked at her, and asked for me. They thought of sending for me, but it was too late. Before the messenger could be despatched, he said with a touch of his old self-importance: 'Silence all of you! my brains are weary; I am going to sleep.' He closed his eyes in slumber, and never woke again. So for this man, too, the end came mercifully, without grief or pain! So that strange and many-sided life—with its guilt and its misery, its fitful flashes of poetry and humour, its fantastic gaiety, cruelty, and vanity—ran its destined course, and faded out like a dream!

Alas for Ariel! She had lived for the Master—what more could she do, now the Master was gone? She could die for him.

They had mercifully allowed her to attend the funeral of Miserrimus Dexter—in the hope that the ceremony might avail to convince her of his death. The anticipation was not realised; she still persisted in denying that 'the Master' had left her. They were obliged to restrain the poor

creature by force, when the coffin was lowered into the grave ; and they could only remove her from the cemetery, by the same means, when the burial service was over. From that time, her life alternated, for a few weeks, between fits of raving delirium, and intervals of lethargic repose. At the annual ball given in the asylum, when the strict superintendence of the patients was in some degree relaxed, the alarm was raised, a little before midnight, that Ariel was missing. The nurse in charge had left her asleep, and had yielded to the temptation of going downstairs to look at the dancing. When the woman returned to her post, Ariel was gone. The presence of strangers, and the confusion incidental to the festival, offered her facilities for escaping which would not have presented themselves at any other time. That night the search for her proved to be useless. The next morning brought with it the last touching and terrible tidings of her. She had strayed back to the burial-ground ; and she had been found towards

sunrise, dead of cold and exposure, on Miserrimus Dexter's grave. Faithful to the last, Ariel had followed the Master! Faithful to the last, Ariel had died on the Master's grave!

Having written these sad words, I turn willingly to a less painful theme.

Events had separated me from Major Fitz-David, after the date of the dinner-party which had witnessed my memorable meeting with Lady Clarinda. From that time, I heard little or nothing of the Major; and I am ashamed to say I had almost entirely forgotten him—when I was reminded of the modern Don Juan, by the amazing appearance of wedding-cards, addressed to me at my mother-in-law's house! The Major had settled in life at last. And, more wonderful still, the Major had chosen as the lawful ruler of his household and himself—'the future Queen of Song;' the round-eyed, over-dressed young lady with the strident soprano voice!

We paid our visit of congratulation in

due form ; and we really did feel for Major Fitz-David.

The ordeal of marriage had so changed my gay and gallant admirer of former times, that I hardly knew him again. He had lost all his pretensions to youth : he had become, hopelessly and undisguisedly, an old man. Standing behind the chair on which his imperious young wife sat enthroned, he looked at her submissively between every two words that he addressed to me, as if he waited for her permission to open his lips and speak. Whenever she interrupted him—and she did it, over and over again, without ceremony—he submitted with a senile docility and admiration, at once absurd and shocking to see.

‘ Isn’t she beautiful ? ’ he said to me (in his wife’s hearing !). ‘ What a figure, and what a voice ! You remember her voice ? It’s a loss, my dear lady, an irretrievable loss, to the operatic stage ! Do you know, when I think what that grand creature might have done, I sometimes ask myself if I really had any right to marry her. I

feel, upon my honour I feel, as if I had committed a fraud on the public !’

As for the favoured object of this quaint mixture of admiration and regret, she was pleased to receive me graciously, as an old friend. While Eustace was talking to the Major, the bride drew me aside out of their hearing, and explained her motives for marrying, with a candour which was positively shameless.

‘ You see we are a large family at home, quite unprovided for !’ this odious young woman whispered in my ear. ‘ It’s all very well to talk about my being a “ Queen of Song ” and the rest of it. Lord bless you, I have been often enough to the opera, and I have learnt enough of my music-master, to know what it takes to make a fine singer. I haven’t the patience to work at it as those foreign women do : a parcel of brazen-faced Jezebels—I hate them. No ! no ! between you and me, it was a great deal easier to get the money by marrying the old gentleman. Here I am, provided for—and there’s my family provided for, too,

—and nothing to do but to spend the money. I am fond of my family; I'm a good daughter and sister—I am! See how I'm dressed; look at the furniture: I haven't played my cards badly, have I? It's a great advantage to marry an old man—you can twist him round your little finger. Happy? Oh, yes! I'm quite happy; and I hope you are, too. Where are you living now? I shall call soon, and have a long gossip with you. I always had a sort of liking for you, and (now I'm as good as you are) I want to be friends.'

I made a short and civil reply to this; determining inwardly that when she did visit me, she should get no further than the house-door. I don't scruple to say that I was thoroughly disgusted with her. When a woman sells herself to a man, that vile bargain is none the less infamous (to my mind), because it happens to be made under the sanction of the Church and the Law.

As I sit at the desk thinking, the picture of the Major and his wife vanishes from my

memory—and the last scene in my story comes slowly into view.

The place is my bedroom. The persons (both, if you will be pleased to excuse them, in bed), are myself and my son. He is already three weeks old ; and he is now lying fast asleep by his mother's side. My good Uncle Starkweather is coming to London to baptise him. Mrs. Macallan will be his godmother ; and his godfathers will be Benjamin and Mr. Playmore. I wonder whether my christening will pass off more merrily than my wedding ?

The doctor has just left the house, in some little perplexity about me. He has found me reclining as usual (latterly) in my arm-chair ; but, on this particular day, he has detected symptoms of exhaustion, which he finds quite unaccountable under the circumstances, and which warn him to exert his authority by sending me back to my bed.

The truth is, that I have not taken the doctor into my confidence. There are two causes for those signs of exhaustion which

have surprised my medical attendant—and the names of them are : Anxiety and Suspense.

On this day, I have at last summoned courage enough to perform the promise which I made to my husband in Paris. He is informed, by this time, how his wife's confession was discovered. He knows (on Mr. Playmore's authority), that the letter may be made the means, if he so wills it, of publicly vindicating his innocence in a Court of Law. And, last and most important of all, he is now aware that the Confession itself has been kept a sealed secret from him, out of compassionate regard for his own peace of mind, as well as for the memory of the unhappy woman who was once his wife.

These necessary disclosures I have communicated to my husband—not by word of mouth ; when the time came, I shrank from speaking to him personally of his first wife—but by a written statement of the circumstances, taken mainly out of my letters received in Paris, from Benjamin

and Mr. Playmore. He has now had ample time to read all that I have written to him, and to reflect on it in the retirement of his own study. I am waiting, with the fatal letter in my hand—and my mother-in-law is waiting in the next room to me—to hear from his own lips whether he decides to break the seal or not.

The minutes pass ; and still we fail to hear his footstep on the stairs. My doubts as to which way his decision may turn, affect me more and more uneasily the longer I wait. The very possession of the letter, in the present excited state of my nerves, oppresses and revolts me. I shrink from touching it, or looking at it. I move it about restlessly from place to place on the bed, and still I cannot keep it out of my mind. At last, an odd fancy strikes me. I lift up one of the baby's hands, and put the letter under it—and so associate that dreadful record of sin and misery with something innocent and pretty that seems to hallow and to purify it.

The minutes pass ; the half-hour longer

strikes from the clock on the chimney-piece ; and at last I hear him ! He knocks softly, and opens the door.

He is deadly pale : I fancy I can detect traces of tears on his cheeks. But no outward signs of agitation escape him, as he takes his seat by my side. I can see that he has waited until he could control himself—for my sake.

He takes my hand, and kisses me tenderly.

‘Valeria !’ he says. ‘Let me once more ask you to forgive what I said, and did, in the bygone time. If I understand nothing else, my love, I understand this :—The proof of my innocence has been found ; and I owe it entirely to the courage and the devotion of my wife !’

I wait a little, to enjoy the full luxury of hearing him say those words—to revel in the love and the gratitude that moisten his dear eyes as they look at me. Then, I rouse my resolution, and put the momentous question on which our future depends.

‘Do you wish to see the letter, Eustace?’

Instead of answering directly, he questions me in his turn.

‘Have you got the letter here?’

‘Yes.’

‘Sealed up?’

‘Sealed up.’

He waits a little, considering what he is going to say next, before he says it.

‘Let me be sure that I know exactly what it is I have to decide,’ he proceeds. ‘Suppose I insist on reading the letter——?’

There I interrupt him. I know it is my duty to restrain myself. But I cannot do my duty.

‘My darling, don’t talk of reading the letter! Pray, pray spare yourself——’

He holds up his hand for silence.

‘I am not thinking of myself,’ he says. ‘I am thinking of my dead wife. If I give up the public vindication of my innocence, in my own lifetime—if I leave the seal of the letter unbroken—do you say,

as Mr. Playmore says, that I shall be acting mercifully and tenderly towards the memory of my wife ? ’

‘ Oh, Eustace, there cannot be the shadow of a doubt of it ! ’

‘ Shall I be making some little atonement for any pain that I may have thoughtlessly caused her to suffer in her lifetime ? ’

‘ Yes ! yes ! ’

‘ And, Valeria—shall I please You ? ’

‘ My darling, you will enchant me ! ’

‘ Where is the letter ? ’

‘ In your son’s hand, Eustace. ’

He goes round to the other side of the bed, and lifts the baby’s little pink hand to his lips. For a while, he waits so, in sad and secret communion with himself. I see his mother softly open the door, and watch him as I am watching him. In a moment more, our suspense is at an end. With a heavy sigh, he lays the child’s hand back again on the sealed letter ; and, by that one little action, says (as if in words) to his son : ‘ I leave it to You ! ’

And so it ended! Not as I thought it would end; not perhaps as you thought it would end. What do we know of our own lives? What do we know of the fulfilment of our dearest wishes? God knows—and that is best.

Must I shut up the paper? Yes. There is nothing more for you to read, or for me to say.

Except this—as a postscript. Don't bear hardly, good people, on the follies and the errors of my husband's life. Abuse *me* as much as you please. But pray think kindly of Eustace, for my sake.

THE END.

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